

Dr. David L. Crowder Oral History Project
Karl W. Devenport – Life During the Depression.

By Karl W. Devenport

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Box 1 Folder 31

Oral Interview conducted by Daniel L. Freed

Transcribed by Victor Ukorebi May 2005

Brigham Young University- Idaho

This is Oral History. I am Daniel Freed. Today, December 7, 1975, I am going to interview Mr. Karl Devenport. The general topic of our interview will be: "Economic Problems – Both General and Individual of the Depression."

Daniel Freed (DF): Mr. Devenport, where were you born?

Karl W. Devenport (KWD): In Mancos, Colorado.

DF: How long have you lived in Ucon, Idaho?

KWD: For about 30 years.

DF: Where were your parents born?

KWD: My mother was born in Deveport, Devenshire, England. My father was born in Nevada, near Carson City.

DF: Will you give us a little of your background and ideas concerning the depression?

KWD: Probably we ought to go back to about 1928 which happened to be the year that I graduated from Brigham Young University and came to Idaho to teach at Madison High School at Rexburg. It was an election year and Herbert Hoover was running for the Presidency. He was elected that Fall by a great majority. His platform primarily was prosperity for the people of the United States. He used as his slogan: a full dinner pail and such things as two chickens in every pot, and a car in every garage at that time they didn't have cars in very many garages but he was going to have one in every garage. His predictions proved to be fatal to him politically. He was president for four years but in 1929, within a few months after he was inaugurated, the Stock Market crashed and investors in the Stock Market lost billions of dollars. Many men thought that the bottom of the depression had been reached, bought back into the market then only to find that their stocks fall again. Eventually there were Bank closures, bankruptcies, and all that sort of thing nation wide and as a matter of fact, all this was happening world wide. It wasn't just in the United States. Soon business began to fall off. Men were layed off of their jobs, and the unemployment situation became very critical. It wasn't long before there were literally millions of men who had no jobs. At that time, if there was such a thing as Unemployment compensation, I don't know about it. And any rate, there was very little to take up the slack when the men began to loosing their jobs. When this happened, of course, people lost their buying power, businesses began to fail wholesale. By the year 1932, the country was in a very critical condition. No one could foresee any possible way to get out of the depression that had taken over the country. At this time, there was another election to face for the presidency. President Hoover ran for a second term but was hopelessly defeated because he had been blamed for most of the fact that we were in such a serious depression. One evidence of this was the fact that where people had driven trucks, they could no longer afford trucks nor could they afford gasoline to operate them. So many old cars were converted into wagons and this type was derisively

named "Hoover Wagons". A name which clung to this type of vehicle until they were worn out, some of them ten years later.

Franklin D. Roosevelt seized the opportunity to run for president at this time. Of course, blamed most of the economic condition on to the Republican Administration. He was elected by a landslide. At first he was given the overwhelming confidence and support of the people of the nation. Even many leaders of the Republican Party had joined in in trying to work out a solutions that would about a normal condition. The first thing that he did upon taking office was to declare a bank holiday. I don't recall how many days that all of the banks in the United States were closed to edict but the congress was called upon to pass certain laws and there were ways of giving at least temporary relief to the bank solution so that they were opened and eventually there was bank insurance and that sort of thing worked out. There were a number of organizations set up to provide employment. One was the P.W.A. and another was the W.P.A. stood for Works Progress Administration. Work was provided on government projects, some of them quite worthwhile, some of them were merely raking leaves in the parks. Some of them were digging holes for one purpose or another. I recall in Rexburg, I imagine you would find yet near some of the intersections in Rexburg, drainage situations that were designed to drain the water on the streets. The land was quite level there and the water seemed to have no place to go, so they would dig holes sometimes fifteen feet deep or more, and then rock them up with rocks and cover them over and put drainage grates in them to drain the water away. That's typical the type of thing that they did. Although we should admit that there were some school houses built, by these government projects that were quite useful and some other public buildings. Which tended to relieve the unemployment situation.

DF: How do you feel the depression directly affected you and your family, Brother Devenport?

KWD: I was one of the more fortunate ones I suppose, I didn't think I was very fortunate at the time, but I did have a job. By most standards, I suppose a very good job. I had started out at a salary of thirteen hundred and five dollars, that's per year and not by month. When seemed like tremendous amount after being in college for several years. The next year I got a big increase, I got I think fourteen hundred and forty dollars. A ten dollar a month increase for nine months. That seemed tremendous to me. Then the next year, 1930, the depression had set on in earnest. All of our salaries were cut back several hundred dollars. Instead of getting the usual increases, I think my salary and the salary of all of those who had begun teaching about the same time I did was a thousand and forty dollars per year. You couldn't depend on that. I remember at the end of the first year or the second possibly, the teachers were called in near the end of the school term and were told that the district was completely out of money. That they would have to cut two weeks from the length of the school term and, of course, cut the teachers salaries the amount of those two weeks. The teachers felt alright about it. They realized that they were probably more fortunate than many, many of the people who were certainly out of work and so that was done. There were other means too of saving on money and of meeting the financial situation. Our district was fortunate in being able to meet their

payroles and when they couldn't, they closed off. Many, many probably most of the school districts in Idaho, at least, had what they called "Registered Warrants". They had to take a ten percent discount from merchants or whomever they could get to cash the check because there wasn't money at the time to meet the salary and they had to just take a chance on whether there would ever be or not. Some people began to doubt that there ever would ever be.

DF: What about the cost of living during that time?

KWD: Well, Dan you'd be surprised some of the prices that we paid. It seems especially fantastic now that we are in a very serious period of inflation. I can recall that on Saturday nights, when there were Saturday sales, that there were specials of hamburger, six pounds for twenty-five cents. As I recall, loaves of bread, for those that could afford to buy baker's bread, sold for a nickel. Milk was usually between five and ten cents a quarts. We didn't buy it from the stores, believe me. We bought it from a neighbor who happened to have a cow. We could proudly carry it home in a bucket or in bottles, but not in milk bottles. It was a very informal affair and the same was true of many products. Potatoes, if you didn't mind going down to the place where potatoes was sorted and sold and shipped and so on, you could pick up all the cull potatoes you wanted to for nothing. They just left them out; the only thing is you had to get down there in the evening before it got so cold that they froze. You could bring home cull potatoes. They were small, but they were edible and they tasted very good. The fuel situation was interesting. There was plenty of coal to be had but there wasn't any money to get it with. So I suppose the majority of the people in Rexburg burned wood during the Depression. I did, I know. I bought, I don't remember for how much one of these so called "Hoover Wagons" on a modified scale. A four wheel trailer affair. I had a hitch put on the back of my Model A Ford and for several months during the summer, we'd make a trip occasionally up to Island Park and cut down dead Lodge Pole Pine. You either used a hand saw or more frequently cut it with an axe. There were no chain saws in those days unfortunately. I doubt if there'd of been gasoline to operate it if you had one. Then we would go up on the Rexburg Bench Bach in some of those Canyons and cut down green Quaking Aspen, and trim them and bring them down as pole. Then by Fall we would have our winter's wood collected and we would hire, at a very small price, someone to come in with a power saws and saw it up to lengths. These power saws were made by taking an old car, stripping it down, taking the body off, leaving the motor on and hooking a circular saw to the shaft of the engine and operating into lengths of firewood. I recall that at one time, a man who lived in Rexburg lost his footing and fell into one of these saws. They were extremely dangerous because there is no guard on them, they were just a hazard. He fell into one of them and was completely beheaded. Which is of course, a pretty gory story. After the logs and poles were cut into lengths, it was a matter of splitting them up with an axe. They made very good firewood. We burned wood exclusively in our kitchen range and also heated our house with a single stove in the front room. The bedrooms... well they didn't need heating. Gardens were a must and we were fortunate in having a very good garden which helped greatly in providing food, especially during the summer months. Also in preparing food for the winter and storing it. I recall buying a couple of fat hogs. I think I paid four cents and a pound live weight for them. I hired one of the

butchers downtown to cut them up for me. Cure the hams and shoulders and bacon and make sausage. We stored it away, I think; we must have rented a freezer-locker at that time. I know we not only didn't have electric freezer but we didn't have an electric refrigerator, we had an ice box at that time.

DF: How was the employment situation in Rexburg? Were jobs available?

KWD: Almost none at all. It was almost impossible for a working man who didn't have a farm of his own or something to get a job. I think it would have been considered extremely unpatriotic for a teacher who had a job, or anyone else who had for part of year to even think of a summer job. I did have a job for a part of one summer helping to take care of a club up on the Snake in River Island Park. It lasted for only six weeks or so. Then later that year I worked for the government for a few months as a typist but after that during the deepest part of the Depression I am sure that there were very few teachers in the nation who had summer job. Finally in, I think, 1939 after things began to get better, I remember I had a job for one day. It was pitching and hauling hay. I was required to ride up nearly to Driggs to where this farm was located. I rode up on the truck. Took about an hour each way. That was free; there was no pay for that. Then I earned twenty-five cents an hour for about a twelve or fourteen hour that day. I felt quite fortunate, incidently, to get it because there just weren't any jobs available even then. Now in 1940, well, actually in 1938, the Second World War was started over in Europe. Then in 1941, the Pearl Harbour completely changed the economic picture in the United States. Immediately there were government projects, war projects, building projects, massive building programs, building factories even the steel factory, I remember in Provo and so on. So that it artificially brought us out of the depression and they were begging for people to take jobs. I took a job as a carpenter for one summer down in the Ogden and Tuilla areas and then the next year I worked for a part of the year or part of the summer for Geneva Steel Works building that steel factory. It wasn't a real stable type of prosperity that came. It came as a result of the war and, of course, as soon as the war was over why many of those jobs were gone.

DF: What kind of Christmases did you spend during the Depression? Could you explain a little bit about the conditions like: presents, and just the mode of living during the Christmas season?

KWD: Well, presents were mighty scarce, I can tell you that. Many people didn't bother to have a Christmas tree because there wasn't anything to put under it. Usually we went down to Provo, Utah for Christmas where my mother and sister lived. My father had passed away just a few years before. We spent very happy Christmases with them because we were always glad to see them and to enjoy them. The gifts were very scarce with very little cost because people didn't have the money to spend and there was embarrassment about it because everybody was in the same boat. Nobody was prosperous at all, but I think that we probably enjoyed our Christmases as much as we do now, may be a little more. I don't believe that there was as much anticipation of what are you going to give me or the feeling of greediness or wanting more than we should have or anything of that sort. People adjusted themselves to the situation so that there was a Christmas

spirit, although it was sometimes a gloomy spirit at that. We usually have a Christmas tree. It was very easy to go out at that time and cut one down without going too many miles. We would build a stand for it and we were in business. Christmas light weren't as common that is, they were used economically if at all. Lots of tinsle and things of that sort to decorate the tree.

DF: Do you feel that the Depression was necessary, and do you feel that it could have been stopped before it ever came?

KWD: Well, I'm not an economist and there have been much wiser men than I who have wondered and contemplated about that. I'm not sure whether things could have been taken in hand soon enough, to head off the Depression or not. I do know that those who were in political office were completely confused and simply did not seem to know what to do. There were some minor attempts made at first, during the first few years of the depression but they seemed to be entirely ineffective. I would say this, that during the Roosevelt Administration they took some very radical steps to try to head it off. We are still suffering from the result of some of the steps that were taken. Some of the legislative actions that were taken and some of the programs that were set up. We have a number of those programs still in effect, some of which have ballooned and have really almost gotten out of hand. Others perhaps are good; some of them definitely are good. We might mention, for instance, the bank situation. The government organized what they called the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporations, which insures all bank accounts in member banks. I am sure that up to the present at least it has been a great blessing in preventing bank failures, and in protecting people who have their money in the banks. Another Corporation is the Federal Savings and Loan Association Insurance which insures savings in Federal Savings and Loans Corporation. There's our Social Security Program which is becoming very expensive and is probably going to cause more troubles in the future and yet it has given protection of millions of old people and is continuing to do that. Many people will debate whether that was a wise move or whether it is going to get out of hand. There are many other programs, of course. The Federal Government has increased its spending till our national debt had gotten completely out of hand and there is no telling where it will lead to. Some of this is a result of the Depression that is trying to keep another depression from coming.

DF: What were your feelings personally about the presidents during the time of the Depression?

KWD: When you say the presidents, we had only one president for a period of nearly thirteen years. There were people who went completely through grade school and high school that knew only one president and that Franklin D. Roosevelt. He was and is a character who has been loved and hated by more people, I guess, than probably any other president. Some were so devoted to him that they felt that he could do no wrong that every thing that he did was right. There were other people who felt that he was tearing the country apart, that he was setting up programs tat were completely detrimental to the country over the long run. I think there is no question that he gave the kind of leadership that helped to turn the economy around and to overcome temporarily many of the

conditions that the nation was facing. We are right now living with some of the bad results of his administration. Some of the things that were done, which in the long run has turn out to be very objectionable and very bad for the country. I think he's still a controversial character. Many people still feel that he was the savior of the country while many others possibly a majority of the people at the present time, in the light of history, feel that he made too many mistakes and set our country in the wrong direction.

DF: Can you think of anything that you'd like to add about the Depression?

KWD: Well, just this: That young people nowadays, I'm sure, can not even fathom what conditions were during the period from about 1930 to almost 1940. It was for some people, particularly in the big cities, a very trying time. A very crucial and unhappy time when there was almost starvation in many families where people didn't know where to turn for their meals. There were long soup lines and soup kitchens in the big cities and things of that sort that we didn't experience in the country and it towns the size of Rexburg of most the Idaho towns. But it was a time when people were frightened. They didn't know which way to turn and they could see no light at the end of the tunnel. They just felt that the world had come to an end for them. We should appreciate the fact that we do have at the present time, even with our recession and our high rate of unemployment today and with our terribly high prices because of the inflation, we still have a very high standard of living in our country. But where this will lead to is also anybody's guess.

DF: Thank you very much, Mr. Devenport. This tape will be placed in the library at Ricks College for use by future researchers.