

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

Oren Furniss – Life During The Depression

By Oren Furniss

December 5, 1975

Box 1 Folder 39

Oral Interview conducted by Mel Hansen

Transcribed by Victor Ukorebi January 2005

Brigham Young University- Idaho

I am Mel Hansen. Today, December 5, 1975 I am going to interview Oren Furniss. The general topic will be the Depression years.

MH: Mr. Furniss, where were you born?

OF: Born in Bates, Idaho, five miles west of Driggs.

MH: How long have you lived in Driggs?

OF: Fifty-seven years.

MH: Where were your parents born?

OF: In Utah.

MH: What part?

OF: Vernal. Close to Vernal, Utah.

MH: What was your occupation during these years?

OF: I did quite a big of wage working in my early years. Late years I've been a rancher and stockman.

MH: How old was you during this time and what were some of the things that you were doing, Mr. Furniss?

OF: I was twelve years old in 1930, the thirties started. I did quite a bit of trapping as a boy. I remember furs then were worth more money than they are today. I trapped weasel and skunk and muskrat, badger and so on.

MH: Were there very many people trapping?

OF: Well now, not on most of those furs except muskrats. There's always been quite a few trappers on the Teton River trapping muskrat and mink, and there is today.

MH: Is there still a great deal of muskrat and mink left in the valley?

OF: There are not as plentiful as they were at one time, but there's still quite a few rats on the river and some mink. There's quite a few weasel and skunk. There's more skunk than usual because nobody traps them today.

MH: Now, you said that one thing that you remembered right off was the trapping you had done. What were some of the other things during this time?

OF: Well, when I was fourteen, that would be in 1932, I moved camp for the Buxtons. As I remember, I got twenty-five dollars a month. Moving camp in the hills was done completely by horses, pack horses. We moved our tepee every day, from one bed ground to the next, but our cook tent stayed in one place for a week or ten days at a time. All of our cooking was done in dutch ovens at that time. We baked biscuits every day. Of course, the camp jack had to come down around once a week for supplies. Salt for the sheep and food for the herder and camp jack.

MH: Now the camp jack, he would mostly be the individual that was taking care of the camp where the sheepman was the guy that would be right out with the sheep?

OF: Yes. The herder was out early in the morning, the sheep left the bed grounds at daylight. He'd be out till maybe ten o'clock. The sheep would shade up. He'd come in and we'd have a late breakfast and then a later meal in the day and then maybe eat in the evening after the sheep went on the bed ground.

MH: What was some of the wages at, at this time?

OF: Well, when I was sixteen, that'd be in 1934, I worked for Fred and Sterling Murdock. They run a big rancy, a lot of ground and had a herd of sheep and cattle and milked a string of cows. I worked for a dollar a day. If you didn't work, you didn't earn a dollar. If you worked a half a day, you earned fifty cents. So wages were not like they are today.

MH: What were the hours for these days then? Were they the same as they are now?

OF: There was no such thing as set hours. It was just up to the boss. If he had a job to start early in the morning at daylight, that's when you started to work. He milked the cows after we had done a days work in the field. It was the same everywhere, everywhere you worked at that time. There were no set hours. If you worked by the month, you were paid by the month. If you took a day off, it didn't matter.

Now when I was seventeen, I stayed home throughout the summer and my father went to work for Irvin Murdock herding sheep. He worked for, as I remember forty, forty-five dollars a month. The reason he was away from home working was to pay the taxes on our home and our ranch. At that time, if you were three years behind on your taxes, the county could sell your home, your farm.

MH: Now on this tax, was there a lot of people who were losing property because they couldn't make tax payments?

OF: Yes, there was. A lot of ground was bought for taxes in those years. I know a person that bought a big spread, just buying land that went for taxes for two or three dollars an acre at that time.

MH: You said that during this particular year that you stayed home and worked on the farm while your dad was out earning the tax money. Do you remember any of the prices of say cattle or sheep at that time?

OF: Well, as I remember, sheep were selling or around seven cents a pound. My father sold mature milk cows to the government for thirteen dollars a head at that time.

MH: What was the government using that cattle for, did they say?

OF: Well, I couldn't say. I don't remember that well at my age. I'm sure they went for meat into some of the programs that the government had instigated at that time. I remember quite a bit about PWA, which was under Roosevelt. It was to create jobs for people. They also had the CCC camps. My brother, Wayne, just older than me went and spent a year in the CC's, which was a government project where young fellows worked for the government. Sent the money home to help keep the family, to keep going.

MH: What were some of the other things that you can remember at this time?

OF: Well, everything was done with horses. When I was eighteen, I spent a summer in Jackson. Worked for Wally Moulton over there. Everything that we done was with horses. When I was with Murdocks, I worked eight head of horses on four sections of harrow and rode a horse behind to drive them. I remember many times driving a gang plow, that's two bottoms, with six head of horses. You worked four side by side and two leaders in front. I don't remember any tractors. My father never owned a tractor during those years.

MH: Now, what job were you doing when you were over in Jackson at this time?

OF: I worked for a rancher over there. The work was irrigating and fencing and planting crops. I remember drilling a patch of ground for him. The grain that he used was what he called horse barley, which is a barley without a hull. Just a blue kernel similar to wheat. Back in those days they didn't raise barley very much, very little barley raised. It was all oats and wheat. Today, most of us raise barley, all barley, very little oats and wheat. So there's been a change there.

MH: Does the price differ any now in your grains than from what it was then?

OF: When I stayed home and worked that summer, oats were fifty to seventy-five cents a hundred. That was the price at that time and wheat sold for a dollar a hundred and less.

Now my brother Henry and I, when I was about nineteen years old, we decided to go to Livingston, Montana and get us a job stacking hay. We'd both had a lot of experience with our own father stacking hay and we were able to get a job in Livingston. It was around the fourth of July. We went out on this ranch to work. Planned on stacking hay together which was loose hay, there was not such things as baled hay, and pushed in with buck rakes and stacked with a hay derrick in a big loose stack. As we were preparing

getting the mowers ready and the rakes ready and the horses trimmed and ready to start haying on this ranch, we were fixing what they called a slobber rake. It was a horse drawn dump rake. We were splitting a car tire to put on the outside of the teeth between the teeth and the wheels to keep the hay from slobbering around the edges. I had a pocket knife splitting the tire which was a used tire and there was places in it that were worn more than others. Two fellows took a hold of the slit that I had cut in the tire and were pulling out on it as I pulled around. I was pulling towards myself and we hit a worn place in the tire and the knife came right on through and stuck in my leg and cut the main artery in my leg. So they put a tourniquet on there and took me to Livingston to the hospital. I remember in that hospital, I was strange and all alone. The boss took me down, my brother stayed on the job. I was sitting in the waiting room for quite a long time before I did anything.

MH: Now you said you hit an artery on it. How did you slow the bleeding down? Was it the old tourniquet, or did you apply pressure?

OF: They used a tourniquet at that time. They don't use it any more, I understand. They used pressure, but it was through a tourniquet. When the doctor came, he opened up the leg and there was as huge swelling. He took a swab in iodine and pushed into the hole. In doing so, the blood spurted all over the wall of his office. Then I remember spending the night there in the hospital. There was a young fellow there that had been riding a bucking horse the day before on the fourth or a couple of days before. He was in there with a broken shoulder. Then there was an old gentleman there that lived alone that was in there with pneumonia at that time. It seemed like we were well taken care of in the hospital.

MH: Was the hospital under, what we would consider sanitary conditions now? Was it ultra clean like they try to keep them now, or was it maybe a little less then?

OF: Well, less than. It was quite different from the hospital in Idaho Falls now-a-days or our hospital here. We were under quite different circumstances. As far as I know, it was clean. I fared well.

MH: What was the cost of this trip to the hospital?

OF: As I remember, about four dollars to have this one stitch in my leg. It was just a knife blade in and out, more or less. They took care of it and kept me there over night and saw that I got on the train the next day.

MH: And then you returned home?

OF: Returned home and spent the rest of the summer here, at Driggs. My brother stayed and stacked the hay but he didn't buy a bicycle. What we had in mind when we went to Livingston was to each buy a bicycle, my older brother Henry and I, and ride back through the Allocone Park. This we never accomplished.

MH: Mr. Furniss, when you returned from Livingston, Montana and you had pretty much healed up, what did you go into then?

OF: Well, I finished the summer with my folks helping around. The following year I went to work for another neighbor, Elba Wood. I worked for him; I remember a lot of it was plowing. He had one hundred and sixty acres that he had rented from the band and we plowed eighty acres of it. I did the plowing with six head of horses on a gang plow. Another job that I remember with Elba is, he wanted to get some poles out for a corral. I was just a young fellow and I had had some experience with my father cutting down poles, but that was all ax work in those days. There was no such thing as a chain saw. You cut all the poles with an ax. He lived in the mouth of Mahogany canyon. One morning he saddled up his horse. Elba Wood was a crippled man; he wore a brace on one leg all the time. He had been crippled with polio. He saddled his horse and took me up to the pole path. He asked me, "Orin, have you had experience falling timber?" I told him I had. I had worked with my dad and I knew how to fall a tree. So we rode up in the pole patch where the Forest Service had marked the trees with a blaze on. He was showing them to me, and he was sitting there on his horse and I started to cut down a tree. These were pine poles about four, five inches through, small trees, but tall. I got one chopped down and it got out of hand for me. Darn if it didn't land right in the saddle with the boss. That was quite an experience. He managed with me helping to lift the pole out of the saddle. When the pole dropped to the ground, he headed back for the ranch. I wasn't sure the rest of the day whether I had a job or not. But it didn't bother Elba. He took it in good spirits. I really enjoyed working for Elba Wood. He, real good manager, and he taught me a great deal about ranching, farming. I've used the experiences and things that I got from him to this day.

MH: Now most of this work that you've been mentioning, the plowing and everything, would have been done during the summer. What was you doing during the winter? Just feeding cows on the farm?

OF: Yes. There was cows had to be fed. Everything was done with loose hay. There was no such thing as baled hay. You pitched the hay on loose, off. There was a lot more work to it then there is today. You can load up two ton of hay in thirty minutes today with bales and in those days it took a big rack. I remember the Buxton's had a twenty foot by ten hay rack. It took some time to put on a ton and a half or so of hay. You had to pitch a ton and a half of loose hay three times a day for their herd of sheep. That was an all day job, feeding. Another thing that I did for Elba Wood was haul coal from Horseshoe Canyon, the mines, into Driggs which was about an eight or nine mile journey. You did it with horses. Elba furnished the team and sleigh and I did the work. We hauled coal for about two dollars a ton. We could haul about two to two and one half ton of coal per trip.

MH: Was there a lot of people that was getting in this coal hauling?

OF: Yes. There was quite a bit of competition. There was regular haulers. A good many of them. Some days there'd be as many as twenty teams at the mine in a day. Back in

those days, slack coal sold for about one dollar and fifty cents, two dollars a ton, because there was very little slack burned. You couldn't burn slack in a cook stove or a heater. You had to have nut or lump so there was a big demand for nut coal and lump coal. This was a problem in those days. They couldn't get rid of the slack coal. The bank in Driggs burned slack and the schools burned slack. I had a contract or Elba, the boss did, of hauling the coal to the bank.

MH: How long would a trip like this, at this time, take you? How much time would it involve?

OF: All day. You started early because you wanted to get there among the first ones. You might get home at four o'clock in the afternoon, or five in the evening.

MH: What were some of the other things you were doing at this time?

OF: I remember one of the jobs on our own ranch was stacking loose hay. That's something I enjoyed. My father taught me to stack when I was fifteen. My older brother, Henry, and I stacked our hay for years. We enjoyed stacking hay.

MH: What about the food? Did your parents do much canning or anything? Or did they buy from the stores?

OF: You didn't buy from the stores in those days. It was all canning. There were eight of us in the family. That is, I had seven brothers and sisters and my parents and we were all home during these years. My father used to hook up a team on the lumber wagon and go out into the lower valley out to Sunnysdale or out South and West of Rexburg. He'd purchase a load of apples and cabbage, onions, squash, pumpkin, all kinds of garden vegetables that could be raised out there that couldn't be raised in the Teton Valley. He used to bring home as many as thirty bushels of apples then we'd put them in a root cellar for the winter. My mother planned on canning four hundred quarts of fruit or more each year. She walked to the canyons which were three miles away up North Twin Creek and pick wild fruit, her and Rhoda Furniss, her sister-in-law. Put up stronussberries, chokecherries, kerns, these little blue kerns or blue grapes and yellow kerns. All kinds of wild fruits. I remember apple butter and apple sauce made out of the apples that we hauled, that dad hauled in.

MH: What did entertainment cost you during this time?

OF: Well, it was nothing like it is today. A dance ticket was from twenty-five to fifty cents. Girls never paid a ticket, just the boys. I remember a full meal cost us seventy-five cents. That's with dessert and all at that time.

MH: One last question today, Mr. Furniss. Do you see any parallels, any similarities, in today's economy or in the way things are going today as compared to what they were during the depression?

OF: Yes, in a way I do. I see and I read quite a bit about people gardening, raising their own gardens. Doing quite a bit more home canning, which I think is good. As far as I'm concerned about the depression, I don't feel that they were bad times. I enjoyed them very much. A dollar was worth so much more than it is today. There is lots of money around today but it doesn't buy the things that it did in the depression. I've never went hungry, never unless I wanted to. We always had enough to eat. Right today I worry about not being able to make a living if certain things happen. They worried the same way in the depression tie. There isn't a great deal of difference. My folks, my parents always had plenty for us to eat. It might have consisted of bread and milk with apples cut in it or bread and milk with onions and things of this sort but it was plenty. We enjoyed life.

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