

Dr. David L. Crowder Oral History Project

# William Alan Dedman –The Depression in Idaho

By William Alan Dedman

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## Box 1 Folder 30

Oral Interview conducted by Sherrie Stubbs

Transcribed by Victor Ukorebi May 2005

**Brigham Young University- Idaho**

This is an Oral History. I am Sherrie Stubbs. Today is March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1974. I am going to interview William Alan Dedman. The general topic is the Depression Years.

Sherrie Stubbs (SS): Mr. Dedman where were you born?

William A. Dedman (WAD): Cisco, Illinois, February 17, 1898.

SS: When did you move to Idaho?

WAD: February 1906.

SS: Did you move with your family?

WAD: My parents and my brothers and sisters.

SS: What part of Idaho did you move to?

WAD: We moved. We first lived in Chester, and then we move about 12 miles southeast of Ashton.

SS: How long did you live in Ashton?

WAD: We didn't live in Ashton, but we lived in that neighborhood at that time until I got married in 1929. I left there for a while.

SS: When the depression started it started with the stock market crash of 1929, and how did this affect your life?

WAD: Well, it made it rather difficult to make a living. There was so much unemployment and a general condition was very bad throughout all the country. And work was very scarce, and there was no public works or any welfare or church relief or anything at that time. You either worked and ate or didn't eat. That was about the size of it.

SS: Did this cause you to move out of Idaho or did you stay in Idaho?

WAD: I had already decided to leave Idaho. And left there about the first of October and went to Salt Lake, and went to work tending plasters for my brother in-law and his partners in October prior to the stock market crash.

SS: While you were working, how long did you stay at this job in Salt Lake? Did the depression cause you to lose your job again?

WAD: Well yes, actually I was at that time, wages were very, very small compared to what they are now. Of course, the cost o living was much less, but I was working on the Kingsbury Hall at the University of Utah, and I was drawing \$6 a day and another fellow

had gone to the boss and told him that he would work for \$4. And the boss wasn't about to say anything about it. So I was laid off the latter part of January. And my wife and the two boys we went to California to find work.

SS: What part of California did you go to?

WAD: In the San Juaquin Valley up at Lindsay, which is about half way between Bakersfield and Fresno.

SS: And what did you do then?

WAD: Well, we picked oranges and I worked for, in the orchards until along in March at which time the work played out. And we returned to Salt Lake, and I resumed working for my brother in-law.

SS: Was that laying plaster again like you did before?

WAD: Yes.

SS: During this time what did you do for entertainment, because you didn't have much money?

WAD: We had very little money, and our earthly possessions we took along with us in our Model A car. And our entertainment was mostly, well, you could hardly call it entertainment. There was practically nothing for entertainment without money.

SS: Yea, in July of 1931 my brother in-law and his partner and my wife and I went to Las Vegas to plaster some government buildings that they had erected at Boulder City, which is 25 miles out of Las Vegas; and there was no housing in Boulder City, so we had to live in Las Vegas, and we lived in, we were fortunate. We got a shack for \$20 month which was made of railroad ties, used railroad ties stood upon end and grew up in a very common floor area. And we lived there until I believe it was along in January or the first part of February. In November we had a daughter born to us. The 25<sup>th</sup> of November at this place and after this we moved into a one-bedroom apartment in a better building, quite a nice little cottage.

SS: In the first place—could you describe what it was like? What the room looked like, and how big it was?

WAD: The first place?

SS: Yes, the first place.

WAD: Well, the total length of building—I recollect was around 16-18 feet long and about 10 feet wide. There was a partition so that there was a very small kitchen equipped with a kerosene stove and then there was the bedroom. There was a double bed for my

wife and I. And then we put in a cot for our two boys. They were about 5 and 6. It was quite crowded, but we – the weather wasn't too cold, and we managed rather well.

SS: You also mentioned the other day something about the living conditions. You really noticed that people, the poor living conditions. Would you describe those of us?

WAD: The people were very destitute. They, there were many people there, many men especially looking for work on the Hoover and Boulder Dam. And the government had an employment office at first what is called Railroad Pass, and it was approximately 19 miles out to this employment office, and the weather was very hot there. It was terrible hot, but there would be men walk out from Las Vegas, and lay around there in the brush and all and try and find employment. There were really destitute, and there was a large settlement of men up at what they called the old ranch which is just about Las Vegas at that time. And they made shacks out of cardboard or paper or tarpaper and anything that they could get to make shacks. That they could exist in. And a great many of them got their food from garbage cans in the back of restaurants and clubs. But, it really was a deplorable condition. And people were desperate. A friend of mine came down and before I met him he went to sleep in the park which was next to the railroad depot, and he had a newspaper put over him. And he took shoes off and put them up by his head, and the next morning when he woke up why somebody had picked his shoes, he was barefooted.

SS: During this time the prices and wages compared; could you live off your wages that you got?

WAD: Well, we did. We had to. There was nothing else we could do. I was very fortunate. I was a good laborer, and I had been working in Salt Lake for \$6 a hour, I mean \$6 a day, so when we went to Vegas why we first got down there I was working for my brother in-law that was my wages and there were plasterers working on the same job I was got \$4 a day. And there were carpenters who contracted to do the finish work on some of the houses there that weren't making \$2 a day. And so I was very fortunate, but after we had completed the work for a while, so I went to work for a contractor from San Diego, and I felt very fortunate to get \$5 a day. A little latter on when work was a little more scarce, and I worked for a day, and my brother in-law and I contracted to dig a footing for a foundation for a house in the sand. And we, when we would get it dug out, real good it would slide in, and we would have to reshovel it out and it got to be quite a deal. So a we actually got, received about 15¢ an hour for our work. But, then after we had done the work that we were caught up on for a while there was no work. And I had to find something, and we got down to where we had 20¢ and didn't have enough to run our car, so I went to better residential section in Las Vegas and I went to the back doors, and I finally found a home that needed firewood so I told them for \$2 I will out into mesquite groves and get them all the wood I could haul in the back of my car for \$2. And I got a job and then I was in the wood business for a little while. But food was very inexpensive. You could buy three large cans of any brand of mild for a dime, and we bought sugar for around 15¢ for 5 pounds, and meat you buy ham or pork chops for 10 to 12¢. And so if you got the dollar why you could really buy something.

SS: When the election came between Roosevelt and Hoover did you ever get to see any of the campaign speeches or anything like that?

WAD: Well, while I was in Las Vegas before the election in 1932, President Hoover came through with his, on a speaking engagement, and as his train stopped in Las Vegas and he came to the back of the couch back coach to a platform and he started to give a speech and he was booed so bad and even threatened but he hastily retired inside and then I saw later on, four years later in Reno I saw President Roosevelt, and heard him give a speech in Sparks Railroad yard.

SS: When President Roosevelt proposed the New Deal and his different agencies did this help? Did you see a change in helping to bring them out of the depression?

WAD: I certainly did. He put first thing that he did was to declare a moratorium, a Bank Holiday. The banks had been going broke all over the country, and farmers were in a terrible condition. Their farms, their mortgages were being foreclosed, and so many bankrupt businesses. When Roosevelt was elected there was a spirit of hope among everybody that I came in contact with, and I think it was all over the country, and he started Public Works immediately, but the Public Works Administration and CCC and PW, no well, what later became welfare, I guess you could call it that. It was Public works work in Las Vegas. And all over the country there was work by young men in work like in the timber and roads and that kind of stuff. And, it was also made a lot more plastering nothing for their grain and for their produce, so we were all happy when Roosevelt was elected.

SS: Did you ever have to yourself use any of his welfare programs?

WAD: I, the only time that I did I came up to St. Anthony in; I believe it was '33 or '34, and I worked on shift on PWA out at the cemetery in St. Anthony. That was all. We did receive a few commodities for perhaps two months.

SS: When you were in St. Anthony, how was it different from Las Vegas and up here, what was the difference between the two?

WAD: Well, about all the difference in the world. The wages up here were so much less than they were down in Nevada, when you had work. Now I was working on the at one, well several times, I worked on highways construction and all, I worked for several outfits and our wages were 62½¢ an hour, although we were limited on hours why then when I came up to St. Anthony a my dad said there was plenty of work in the spuds and I came up and I could get a limited amount of work for 30¢ an hour, and living was higher here than it was in Las Vegas.

SS: So, this made the living conditions bad or made it more difficult for you?

WAD: It was more difficult. The wages being less and unemployment less than what you ate and where you lived costing more. Why it naturally made it harder to get along on what we had.

SS: Did you stay in St. Anthony long or did you go back to Las Vegas or where did you go after that?

WAD: I was, at that time I came up to St. Anthony, I was living about a hundred and thirty-five miles from Reno, at a little place called Mike; and when I came up and offered 30¢ an hour part-time work in the spuds I left my wife in a motel cabin for a while and I returned to Nevada and went to work for Dodge Construction Company. And as soon as I had enough money saved up, why I returned and got my wife and children, and we returned to Nevada.

SS: In Nevada did you continue to work for this Dodge Construction Company?

WAD: No, the way it was why then they finished their strip of road they had to do then I changed to Nevada Rock and Sand. But, Las Vegas, Nevada, was absolutely no union as far as laborers were concerned. At least while we were there.

SS: Did the union, did you notice that the unions were stronger during the depression than they were before?

WAD: I don't think they were. I think that, oh well, I know that union men in Las Vegas would work for any pertinent pay and any odd money that they could get. They were union plasterers. There was one I worked with him, that came up from Los Angeles. He worked for \$4 a day, and the scale in Los Angeles, I imagine would have been around \$10 or \$12 but people were not so choosy in what they did. Their main interest was to find something where they could get food for their shelter for their families. It was absolutely no help from the government in any way at the first part of the depression until after Roosevelt was put in.

SS: After about 1935 kind of, when Hitler started to move in Europe, do you think this had any effect on making the economy better in the United States, being able to supply him?

WAD: No, I do think that a Hitler going into the Rhineland had nothing to do with employment at all in this country. I don't think that we were much affected until after along into 1939 when Europe went to war. But the unions after Roosevelt moved was for a while the unions were allowed to get standard wages. I know when I went to Reno from Harrington we; I received a \$1.25 an hour which was \$10 a day. That was a lot of money back in the depression time. Of course, we were coming out of the depression somewhat in 1935 and '36, along in there, but I wanted to return to the farm. My father had a small ranch up here, and he was having it very hard to get along on, and the government started a program that was to help people get started on farming and made loans available, and so my dad checked at the office in St. Anthony, and they thought that I could probably get a loan to start farming. So in August of 1939 I returned to Idaho; and in the spring of 1940, I got a loan from the government and rented and then bought my father's ranch. And I continued operating that until I retired.

SS: The real change came when Roosevelt was elected, and he started these government programs, and your father's ranch, and did you hear much of what his problems were up here in Idaho running it and getting his crops. What were they?

WAD: Well, he wasn't getting anything for his grain to speak of. And then he had the misfortune to have his crops hailed out a couple of times, which certainly didn't help any. And his health was not too good, and he could not afford to hire somebody to do his work, then he got old age assistance, which I think was about \$40 a month for him and his wife.

SS: In 1939, when you returned to Idaho, were you happy to return here? Did you notice a big change when you started taking over the farms? Did you start making more money? Was the economy better and things?

WAD: Well, in 1939 I took over the farm I had my first crop of course, in 1940. Through the winter and summer, spring and summer, we had very little in the way of money. I drew unemployment from Nevada of \$15 a week for 15 weeks, and I had to go 20 miles to collect it. And we managed with the loan I got from the government. It enabled me to buy some of my father's implements which were pretty well-worn out and his horses which were about the same. To get seed and feed and, I got cows and chickens with this money that I borrowed, and that enable us to get by. The first crop that I had was a fairly food crop of wheat and I sold it in the spring after paying storage on it through the winter. I got 59¢ a bushel, and it wasn't very much. And we didn't get rich on it. The next year the war was declared, why after that then the price of grain started going up and my next crop I know that I got \$1.01 per bushel for it.

SS: What were some of the government programs the New Deal brought out besides the welfare and the ones that you mentioned with farming? Were there any other ones?

WAD: Well, there was the, I think I mentioned CCC which was the Civilian Conservation Corps. I believe that this paid the fellows that worked on it a \$1.00 a day their board and clothes, and then there was the Public Works Administration which enabled towns and countries and all to put up schools and things like that and then there was the out-right welfare. There were several programs that along the line, and the people really did appreciate them too.

SS: The education during this time, did a lot of kids drop out of school because of the money situation?

WAD: Yes, a lot of them, well there were nothing like buses and all that we have nowadays, and sometimes kids wouldn't even have suitable clothes to go to school in. And then people moved around so much. I know one year our kids were in four different schools.

SS: Did this affect your children in anyway with their being in four different schools?

WAD: Well, they seemed to adapt to it pretty good but naturally they would have done better if they had been in one school for the entire time with the same teachers. But, they got by like the rest of us.

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