

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

J. Edgar Birch-Experiences of the Depression

By J. Edgar Birch

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Box 1 Folder 13

Oral Interview conducted by Kevin Birch

Transcribed by Sarah McCoristin February 2005

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I am Kevin Birch. Today, December 3, 1974, I am going to interview J. Edgar Birch. The general topic will be the Great Depression.

Kevin Birch: Mr. Birch, where were you born?

J. Edgar Birch: I was born in a place walled Wilford, Idaho. That's actually about five miles south of the city St. Anthony.

KB: How long have you lived in Fremont County?

JB: Well, in another week I will have lived here 75 years, all of my life.

KB: Where were your parents born?

JB: My parents were born in the state of Utah; my father in Coleville, a little community east of Salt Lake City, and my mother Clarkston, a little community in Cache Valley.

KB: What was your occupation?

JB: Well, my occupation all my life, since I've been more or less on my own, has been farming.

KB: What were some of the general effects of the depression on your immediate family?

JB: Well, if I could just give two or three items that kind of led up to the depression there, kind of giving my family background just a little bit, so far as my own personal family's concerned. Of course, in 1914 we became involved in World War I. In 1918 the Armistice was signed. In 1924, I married Veda Munk and by the time the depression came around in 1929, we had two children; our oldest son Lowell, and our other son, Vincent. Like most of the families at that time, beginning our family life, we didn't have a great deal of money to engage in any broad extensive farming. I farmed for a while conjointly with my father. We lived in a home north of St. Anthony, and we felt the full effects of the depression because the commodities we raised on the farm for sale were those commodities that went down very low in price.

Every avenue of life was pretty much affected. Our transportation means were affected because we had the old Model T Ford at that time, pretty much the Model T. The Model A, I believe was in existence, but in order to get our gasoline we had to use coupons, and gasoline was rationed at that time, as we got into the depression. We found it inconvenient to go very far from home because of the fuel situation. It had quite an effect on our farming operations; we were motorized to a certain extent, we had some tractors-small tractors. Our food production; we found that a lot of the foods disappeared entirely, sugar was rationed, we found that a lot of the foods disappeared entirely, sugar was rationed, flour was rationed, milk products dropped tremendously in price, beef dropped radically low. I recall that pork, at some of that time was selling for 2 cents a

pound. That was live-weight pork, off the farm. I remember to that butter got down to about 15 cents a pound. Wheat was 25 cents a bushel. I'm not positive about potatoes, but I think that they went for 50 cents for a hundred pounds. Some of the luxury foods were almost taken off the market entirely; we didn't have them. By living on the farm we had most all we needed to eat. We all grew gardens, we were perhaps more fortunate than a lot of the people who were day laborers and living in the cities. We had breadlines and handouts even in the small town of St. Anthony which at that time had a population of about 2700 people. A lot of people were dependent entirely on government programs that offered them foods, some of them provided clothing, some of them provided clothing, some of them I think helped with transportation. They helped the general necessities of life in one way or another, these government agencies did. And there were none of the people that were able to live on a very high plane because there wasn't anything in the nature of necessities that was in great abundance after the war, or after the depression. It had gone on for a little while.

KB: What about the price of gas? Was it anything comparable to today?

JB: Oh, well no. Gasoline, of course, was much cheaper per gallon than it is now. I just don't recall exactly how it was, but it was rationed, and we had, as it wasn't very plentiful for a good part of the depression. And that became more critical as we moved along up the latter part of the depression when we got involved in World War II.

KB: Was there anything like diesel fuel back then, or was gasoline the major source of fuel?

JB: I presume there was diesel fuel used in some of these monstrous trucks and vehicles; larger transportation, such as that. There was no diesel fuel used in this area at all on the farm, we used gasoline entirely.

KB: What about the price of land, what was it like back then, was it high or low?

JB: Lands of course varied, but as the depression progressed situations got so severe that there was any amount of farming ground that could have been bought had anyone had the price to buy it with. Conditions gradually became worse. We found that a lot of the farmers were obligated with mortgages and loans on their lands, and before the depression was over here in this county, Fremont County in the state of Idaho, there was 75% of the properties of the county and that was particularly true of the real estate as it affected farming; there was 75% of those properties that were on the delinquent tax role. That meant that the taxes weren't coming into the county, and simply because of the fact that our produce wasn't bringing sufficient in the way of prices, that we could pay our obligations such as our taxes. A lot of the times, some of the farms that were mortgaged, the farmers weren't able to pay their interest as it became due to each year, let alone pay anything on the principal. Before the depression ended, there were just a lot of properties, particularly farm properties, upon which the mortgage companies had to foreclose, and then like I say, there were 75% of the properties that were on the delinquent tax role in the county. So it was a terrible situation, and awfully hard to get

out from under. It was almost hopeless situation, and there a good many farmers and also home owners that just simply got up and walked off and left their properties. Some of them walked away from their farms and just left them there. And others walked away from homes, and some of them even their building interests, and business interests.

KB: Were yields anything like they are today back then on the drops?

JB: Well, no. Probably not when you get up in the higher yields, but with the proper kind of rotation on the farm, and good farming practices in those days we got consistently good yields when weather and other conditions were favorable. It wasn't unusual to get crops of grain where we harvested them and realized 60 and sometimes 65 bushel to an acre. That was about the highest yields in wheat. In our potatoes at that time, of course, they weren't grown as extensively as they are now, but yields in those days on properly cared for ground and with proper fertilization and that was with manure or green crops such as alfalfa plowed under, and things like that. No commercial fertilizer. It wasn't unusual to get 20 tons of beets. The yields were very good, considering the expense that was involved in bringing the ground up to fertility, because we used almost entirely either farmyard manure, or in the practice of rotation we turned our alfalfa crops under and grew crops on that plowed up the ground.

KB: Were there many insect problems or anything like that?

JB: Well, we didn't have insect problems anything extensively as we've had them since that time. At that time we scarcely knew what an alfalfa weaver was, we didn't know what a potato beetle was, we didn't have some of the aphids and insects that are pests that we have in our grain now days. I would say that the insect problem was nothing compared to what it is today, although on year during the depression we had an unusual situation in this county, we had a cricked invasion. We had a band of crickets move in from Marysville on the east to Egin on the west, and that covered an area 14 miles long and 2.5 miles wide with not millions but billions of crickets. In fact, the ground was so infested that a lot of places in that area there 2 miles by 12 miles you couldn't have dropped a dime anywhere. Other than that infestation though, I don't recall any particularly serious insect infestation. WE did have a problem in those days with jack rabbits and some of those animals, these predators. The jack rabbit trouble was largely in the winter time, after we had stacked our hay in our yards. That, by the way, was without any implements such as the hay balers. The hay was all stacked in lose stacks, and the rabbits would come in the winter time, and they became so thick that they would undermine the haystacks, and they would eat up under the haystacks for three or four feet as far as they could reach, and undermine the haystack all the way around it for three of four feet, eating under it. I've seen rabbits lined up coming from the north out here in the sticks for ½ mile where there was one rabbit right behind the other on a trail all the ways, so it looked like a solid line of rabbits. But other than that, I can't recall that we had any particular trouble with rodents or predators or insects.

KB: Did you ever take part in any of these barn raisings and quilting bees?

JB: Yes, we engaged in a lot of these in the early years of the depression. When someone was building a barn, or a house or a room on their home, it wasn't anything unusual for fifteen or twenty of the neighbors to all assemble there together on a certain day and all of them work together in the erection of the barn or the house or the room that they were building and they would all do it free gratis with just the joy of association and neighborliness. Usually the mothers, the wives, the ladies would come and they would arrange and assemble a feed or a meal and they would make it a real sociable time and they really had some of the finest times I ever experienced in sociability in that because it was a neighborly project with the idea of being helpful and they all just pitched in and really helped and then at the end of the day the fellow whose barn was erected or home or room was usually well completed and he wasn't out a lot of money because he didn't have money to spend on it and everybody had given a hand toward helping their neighbor and it engendered generally a good feeling. And the same thing was true of sewing bees. The ladies used to get together and they would sew quilts, make quilts for some family or they would sew on other things. Sometimes make clothing for the poor. Those were very common in those days.

KB: Then back in the depression the attitude of most people around here was to help the other people?

JB: Yes, that was very manifest during the depression. People found it a necessity there to get together and unite in doing a lot of these things alone. The labor situation, materials, and everything else, it was much easier when they went together and a group of them getting into a unit.

KB: What about some of the produce companies? What were some of the names of some of them who were the major ones back then, like spud warehouses and the grain brokers?

JB: Well, in the potato line, we had the Harvey Schwendiman Produce, the Lew Daavis and Joe Anderasen Produce, The Remington Produce, and I think we had the Tibbitts Produce. I'm not positive of that. That would be the potato line. In the grain, we had the Miller Brothers Elevator, the St. Anthony Flour Mill manufactured flour at that time, and other by-products such as bran, and shorts and things like that we bought as feed for our animals. The other industry that was quite prevalent at that time was the see pea industry. A good many farmers were growing an acreage of these peas, and at one time we had six different rather large companies. They put these peas out on a contract to the farmer in the spring, and he'd grow them, harvest the crop, and then he'd take back to them enough peas, to pay for the seed, and they'd pay him for the crop and there were six of those large industries here at one time. They helped the monetary situation like everything. Then they had what they called their picking rooms, where they picked the tares and disqualified seed out of the good seed. They hired, I am certain in some winters as many as 500 women, girls working and picking seed peas. It helped the economy like everything at that time, to have that agency here.

The pea crop was a peculiar crop. The first year you do fairly well if you had fairly fertile ground, but it was one of the worst crops in the world for bringing in weeds. I suppose in getting our insects and weeds and our area than all the other crops combined. You couldn't very successfully grow peas more than one year, then you'd have to rotate with some other crop, in one of the years of the depression when we had that cricket invasion: On my farm I had alfalfa and wheat, mostly, growing that season. My neighbor, who joined me on the west, had those crops and then he had 35 acres of peas seeded. The crickets came onto our farms on the twentieth of May, they left on the twentieth of June. My farm didn't have a spear of grass on the whole 160 acres. Neither did my neighbors farm with one exception, the 35 acres of peas that he had seeded were still there when the crickets left, and there wasn't a weed anywhere to be found in those peas; those crickets had cleaned out every weed in the whole 35 acres. He had a wonderful crop of peas, so that was something that might be well to remember in the future there, that if you're trying to grow something that you won't have trouble with a cricket invasion, why, grow seed peas.

KB: What about government agencies and things like that back then, were there any such things as cooperatives?

JB: Well, there were a few farming cooperatives and such as that, but they weren't extensive at all at that time. We had a lot of governments agencies that came into existence with the idea in mind of being helpful to the people of the land. Some of those agencies functioned in different ways: Some of them provided food, some of them provided clothing, some of them tried to provide different forms of work.

KB: One of them that was quite helpful in our area, being adjacent to the forest like we are, was a federal program known as the C.C.C. organization. That was set up to take the young men, particularly I like New York and Boston and Philadelphia and those places, and bring them out here. Those young men who are out of jobs and bring them out here to this area near the forest, and they had them engaging in different projects in the forest. They had them building bridges across creeks and little brooklets, they had them cleaning out material and making roads so that contractors could get in to those areas to get the saw logs out for lumber. The C.C.C. project was quite an endeavor, it brought hundreds and hundreds of those boys out here and it provided thousands and thousands of dollars to help them and their families in the expenses that they had at that time. It was really a worthwhile project. It also improved the forest and gave the boys an incentive to work again. All in all I think it was a very good project. There were other types of projects, like I said particularly to get the food available. There were some incentives of the government to get the farmers to grow certain foods that were needed. There were some, but they weren't anywhere near as extensive as they've been in World War II and later times.

KB: what about your political career. Was that affected in any way by the depression, or the results of the depression?

JB: Well, it was the aftermath, you might say, of the depression. Along the year that World War II closed, I went out the Assessor's office at that time elected in 1944, I served there four years. My object in going there was to try and get some additional money to help defray my expenses, because the farm wasn't taking care of my needs and my family's needs. Like a number of the rest of them, I lost my farm shortly before that, due to the interest of any of the principal. My taxes went delinquent for three years, and my property like a lot of it went on the delinquent tax role. I went into politics at the Assessor's office to try to relieve that situation. It did help to a certain extent. I served two terms.

KB: Was there many serious health problems back during the depression that you noticed? Did it have any specific effects on your family?

JB: Well, no, not in this area. Our health problems and hazards came ahead of the depression. They came mostly in 1918, when we had the invasion and epidemic of the Asian flu. But after 1918 I don't think we had any real problems. Our problems came back to us from the war more than any other way, when these people who had been over in the Pacific areas, around where there was Malaria, and some of those illnesses. When those boys started coming home some of them came back and were still troubled and agitated with some of those situations. I would say that our medical situation and our health situation was more acute following World War II than it was during the depression itself.

KB: What about the irrigation districts, were they formed back then?

JB: Well, of course, the incentives and then encouragement on the part of the government to increase production and engage more intensively in farming brought forth the necessity of more irrigation, because this area in here is normally quite dry without irrigation. Irrigation projects, of course, had been here in a small way from the early beginning of settlement in this country, way back in the 1880's. But those canal systems had been rather small, and not very numerous. The area around here, we did start in rather intensively in the late 20's and 30's to building up our irrigation system with the development of reservoirs along our rivers where we could store the water for purposes of irrigation and there was a lot of intensive activity on these irrigation projects at that time. The Bureau of Reclamation went out rather strong on a number of irrigation projects up and down particularly the Snake River and its forks.

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