



Life During the Great Depression

Based on an interview of Jay Spencer
by Tina Spencer on December 7, 1997

One Sunday evening, Jay Spencer related some humorous and touching stories about The Great Depression. You can't tell he suffered much just from looking at him, but once you hear about his teen years, his zest for life, how hard he works, and how he's grateful for everything, you can tell he's gone through something. He has lived in many places and fixed many things because "if you didn't fix it, it wouldn't get fixed." Here is his story.

I was born on June 25, 1910 in Dublan, Old Mexico. We lived in a one-story adobe building. I don't remember it, but I did have pictures. But I don't know where they are right now. Poncho Villa chased us out in 1912. I was two when we left. Then we moved into Provo. My dad worked in a cafe as a waiter to start with.

About ten years later we moved over in Lost Creek. That's over toward the hills where those trees are. There's three or four houses. We lived in one of those. Dad was the foreman for the Anderson farms. It was the Lost Creek area.

I was about 12 or 13 when we moved down here. No, I was younger than that. We moved in this house over where Al Peterson and his wife lived when I was 10 years old. I can remember that. I had a birthday party on my tenth birthday, and I had one pal that I wanted to be sure and be to the party. So, I stayed and helped him do his chores so he could get to the party, and I was late to my own birthday party.

My dad used to hunt a lot. Bring in deer and wild turkeys for part of our meals and so forth, and sometimes we had to go out with a shot gun and shoot into a herd or into a flock of blackbirds and have blackbird pie, if you can imagine that!

When I got old enough to work, a dollar a day was big money. At one time, after I was married, I got paid a silver dollar for a day's work that I did. I was showing it to my wife Emma and dropped it on the porch. There was a crack in the porch and it went through underneath, so we tore the whole porch down to get to that dollar. That's how rough things got. Seemed everybody was poor. I think there was one telephone in town. Two or three people had cars; everybody else gets horses, buggies, and wagons as their transportation, or you walked.

We farmed mostly, and then in the wintertime when the kids were going to school after I got old enough, I'd go with my dad to work on construction jobs. This is quite a bit later when I got older. I helped build that tunnel through Zion's Canyon in 1928.

We worked eight, nine hours most of the time. We'd get big money, lot bigger than we'd get here at home, on the farms, which you'd get three-fifty a day.

When we were out away from home, usually only construction jobs, they had their own quarters. They'd take pay out for it. I don't remember the price for a meal or for your keep, but they held that out of your pay.

I got married on September 16, 1927, I believe. We didn't have much of a honeymoon. We didn't go anywhere. We went home.

I went to four years of high school. I didn't go to college, but I had four years of . . . the first six-weeks of the season when you'd start school, we had to stay out and top sugar beets to make enough money to get us through the school year.

I worked with a team of horses and a big scraper for six months on a road that goes from here to Fish Lake. Stayed in a tent in the dead of winter. Nearly froze to death, making enough money to go get my diesel training. I made it to a diesel engineer school in Los Angeles. And I taught them more than I learned. That's no kidding. When I was 14 years old, I overhauled the tractor for W. R. Johnson. He used to be the mayor for this town. That's before they ever put tires on tractors. It was these big steel lugs and steel wheels on the front. That was my first mechanic's experience. I did it on the lawn. Up in the far end corner of Aurora, out on the lawn; that's why they term me a shade-tree mechanic. It worked! It did a good job. That started me on my mechanical engineering.

My father wasn't that mechanical. It just all come in up here. I had training after that when we was down in Tucson, Arizona. I went to school down there. I learned to do lathe work and all kinds of mechanical work like that. And we went down in two outfits. We had an old touring Chevrolet. It didn't have any curtains or anything in, and an old Model-T Ford with a flat bed in the back that we had all of our supplies and bedding and everything on. We stayed over there. That was in 1927. That's where I took schooling, and I overhauled both the outfits while we was down there. We came back on thirty-eight dollars less than it took us to drive down, so I know we made some improvement on it. Thirty-eight dollars we saved coming home. They ran better, and gave better mileage.

The whole troop went. And it is a troop. Eleven kids, a mom, and dad. They came in the old Chevrolet, and Harold, I, and Rosalie most of the time rode in the Model-T Ford.

Well, we was going to Tucan for a winter vacation. My dad worked on a farm down there. An experimental farm, to improve farming. He worked on that farm all the while we was down there. The family lived in Binghampton. That's five miles out of Tucson. Now, it's one big city, but at that time the sagebrush, and old rocks in between. My sister Rosalie and I lived in town on 50 Driscal Street with some of mother's folks' kids. Levaré Price and Edna Price that was two of mother's sisters and one brother. I lived in with Levaré Price. They wondered where his twin brother had been all these years, you know up until 1927. We had a good time. Went to school down there, and that's where I learned my trade as a—what should we call me—machinist. Yes, I was a machinist.

I met my wife here in Aurora. She was my girlfriend for about five years. And after I went down to Zions Canyon to help build that tunnel through, I met a little gal down there that I went with for a year as a sweetheart. That was my last wife that was here, Florence. I married her 62 years later.

I had one of dad's brothers, and my dad and I, and some of my brothers helped part of the time, but we went up to a place called Neoch. There was a lot of dried timber, dried trees. We didn't have chain saws then, but we did it with one man on each end of the saw, and sawed them down like so. We had two teams of horses, and we loaded a half a load of logs on the wagon. Rolled them up rails up onto the wagon. A half a load, and it was so steep up out of the canyon where we was getting the trees up out of the road that we'd have to hook both teams on the one half a load and go up out of the Neoch Canyon up onto the main road. Roll the logs off on the upper side of the road up the hill, then go back and get another

half a load, and come up and put the rails out on that half a load, and put this other half a load on the top of the other one. Then we'd bring them home.

Neoch is up in the Fish Lake area. Then I built the little sawmill that sawed out the logs. Four inches thick we'd saw them and eight inches wide. And built our first home with that.

My folks had one, and it was built by Tineas Andersen. That's many years ago. When we moved from here, from this place up here Aften Petersen, then we built the new home. I built my home, well, mine and Emma's, this side of theirs about a hundred feet. We even sawed the lath, and then nailed them up, and had it plastered inside. We had some of the boards run through a planer. I didn't have a planer then, but we run them through a planer. To make the window frames, we bought the windows, and then we'd put this spray mark around them with the lumber we had planed. The logs were just left rough, and screwed together with big, long screws, and nails.

Well, they was thicker than four inches really. They was solid wood four inches thick, then a little gap, then the lath, then the plaster over that. So there's about five and a half to six inches. Lath, you know are only three-eighths of an inch thick. So, that was quite an undertaking.

I made the sawmill out of two old Model-T Ford front axles and I knocked the wooden spokes out so these steel hubs run on regular railroad rails. Took a Buick engine, and made a shaft come out the back. There was no belts to drive the saw and to put the saw on the straight out the back end of the engine. The engine was taken out of the car. I made a mounting for it. Then that shaft run out to the saw. We hooked the gas feed to the emergency brake, and Emma ran the gas feed for the speed; we didn't have a governor on it, so that . . . to make this carriage that had the log on it go down the track, I had my brother down there with a crank and a big long rope. He'd wind that crank, and as soon as the log come up and started into the saw, your grandmother would throw the throttle wide open. Harold would have to gage it by how fast he pulled it through. Rather it could pull it so it wouldn't slow it down too much. Then, he and another guy would get on there and push it back. I had a piece of an old carpenter's square nailed onto this carriage that I built with a little pointer so I knew just right how far it was from the standard, that's the part that the log lays against, was from there to the saw. It was one foot, then I'd move up 1 1/4 inch, I'd pull this lever, and pull it ahead. Pull it sideways, I mean, the log sideways to cut the next board off. I'd have to come 1 1/4 inches because the saw takes 1/4 out, so we have to come an extra 1/4 to get an inch board. But, if I was sawing this board by eighths, then I had to put a 16 inch log on there. I'd have to saw down the middle to get two 4 inch pieces. You'd have to take a slab off the outside, and turn it and be sure that was 16 1/4 inches because the saw would take 1/4 out of the middle. Then we'd shovel the saw-dust out, and haul it over with a wheel barrow over by a lean-to we built on the granary. We'd store ice in that for the summer to make ice cream. We'd sell a little. It'd take you 30 minutes to an hour to get in there and shovel the saw dust back so you could find the ice to sell somebody; 15 cents would buy enough to make a batch of ice cream. You'd spend 30 minutes at least. That should tell you something about it.

To get ice, we went up to Koosharem Reservoir with a team of horses for several days during the fall. We'd put on our skates, and skate way out in the lake and saw a hole or chop a hole, then we had this saw, it was about like you'd saw the trees down with. Saw into the water, and saw big square blocks out. We had grippers that would take a hold of that block of ice, and lift it out on. Then you'd skid it out across the lake on the ice over to the wagon. They was so heavy that we had to have a big pole upright and another log, or tree, about yeah big, with a long end and a short end with these grabber hooks to grab hold of that piece of ice, pull down on this end, the block of ice would go up, and then you'd swing it around over the wagon and let this end up and it would unhook it and then swing it back around to get another

block. We'd fill this lean-to on the granary full of ice and then pile sawdust all around it, and it'd keep all summer. All that we didn't sell or use ourselves.

To get money during this time, we was farming and in the wintertime we'd go on construction jobs. I helped build that road up through Strawberry Canyon up to Duchesne. Look on your map, when you get a map, you'll see where Duchesne is. That was one project.

I drove a four-up Fresno they call it. It's a big scraper that takes four horses on to pull it. It had runners so when you tip it out, it runs on these runners and dumps the load out. This was for some construction company. Ogden. Ogden Construction Company. Part of the time I run a jackhammer to drill the holes to blast the rocks and that. The rest of the time I was driving this scraper with four horses on it.

The Depression made me thankful for every little thing we had. Everything! We had to fix it or it wouldn't get fixed.

I hope there's not another Depression. That's how it affected me. There could be. But, I don't know how. People are millionaires now. I'm not.

The crop that caused the most working was the only cash crop that I can remember. Sugar beets. This was a sugar beet country. Dad used to raise 78 acres of sugar beets. You have to manure the ground. We used to go out and shovel it out with pitchforks into a wagon. We didn't have manure spreaders. We didn't have tractors. You shoveled it in, and you shoveled it out. You spread it with your fork, and you'd go up this, and back this. Up that, and back this, and up that, and back this until you get the ground covered. Now, they take a tractor with four or five plows on the back, and plowed it ten miles an hour. At that time, you would have one plow to lay the ground over and plow it. It took three horses. You'd make two rounds and then rest the horses for five minutes. Then you'd make two more rounds. That would only move you over about ten inches each round. Now, they do 20 acres in a day, easy. It's a different world.

They use it and take it to a sugar beet factory, and grind them up, and squeeze the juice out of them, and boil it down, and make sugar. The part that is ground up and left over after you make sugar was the syrup they used to mix with straw to feed to the cows. They didn't have enough hay, so they'd dump this sugar beet syrup on the straw so the cattle would eat that to save feed. Then they'd give them a little hay to go with it, you know. Then, the pulp that would come with it was the ground up sugar beet. I don't know how to compare it. Ground up turnips maybe is about what it looked like. That's what a lot of them fed their cattle to help fatten them up for market. People that was raising cattle.

I was driving a scraper on the Fish Lake Road, and the Zion's tunnel down there, my first job, I was a water boy for the whole lower end below the tunnel. I'd take four big 2 1/2 gallon water bags and criss-cross them. They had ropes on around my neck. Then they was made out of canvas. Two on each hip, and I watered them, all the working men going down the hill, and at the little spring at the bottom of the canyon I'd fill my bags, and water them as I went back up. That was a day's work, and it was a day's work. Then after I got along so good doing that, at noontime, halfway down, I'd make the coffee for the workers that was sloping the banks and moving the rocks and doing all the hard work. I didn't know anything about making coffee, so I'd just take this big five gallon can, and build a fire under it, put five gallons of water in it, dump in a full pound of coffee. I had no idea. But, they bragged on that coffee. I was the best coffee maker in the state.

It was so funny. I didn't have the first idea how to make coffee. On a real good day they promoted me to a candy boy. I was supposed to drive what they called a candy wagon. It was a little old Chevrolet. We didn't

have pickups like they do now, but they'd taken the back seat off, and sawed the frame off and built a flat thing on the back. That was the candy wagon. I drove that up and down the road while they was building the road and the tunnel. There was always a trail to drive up and back. Taking whatever supplies they needed up and down. Giant powder, chains, shovels, whatever they needed while I was hauling that up and down the hill. After I got along with that real good, then they promoted me to an air-compressor operator. I pumped air for seven jackhammers. The jackhammer is what drills the hole in the rock so they could put giant powder in there, and blow the rocks apart.

My dad was a powder monkey they call them. They are the ones that drill the holes. They used to drill holes 20 feet down in the ground. Twenty feet deep with the air from this air compressor I'm telling you about. He was one of them driving it. When you'd drill a while, it'd chip the rocks all up in fine dust. Then, they pull a trigger and it blows the dust up out of the hole. Then you drill a while longer, and push a button and it blows the dust out of the hole. By the time they get down 20 feet and it's time to reload, they've got all the holes drilled they need to blow this big place apart. They'd put 15 sticks of dynamite in the bottom of that and blast it. That'd just swell a pothole in the bottom. Then they'd put four or five full cases of dynamite down in it. Then they wired them all together with electric wires. They had electric blasting caps. Then you'd get 300 or 400 yards away from it, and they had a battery that you'd run this plunger down. That would cause the spark to go through these wires and set them all off at once. That would just move the whole mountain. I was drilling for that. I mean, I was pumping the air to drill the holes. That was my last job down there.

Twenty-two years later, I got to where I couldn't find a job around here to make money, so I moved to Sparks, Nevada. We spent about ten years in Sparks, Nevada. I worked at a garage at night, and the railroad in the daytime. I didn't make very much, but it was a lot better than we was making. I can't think of any figures to go by how much a check would be. We started in 1936 paying into Social Security. They would hold out so much of your check so we'd have it now. Now they're stealing it from us.

In Holster, California. I was working on a natural gas line for the PG&E. Pacific Gas & Electric Company. I learned to be a welder there. That's where I did my first welding. I was a welder helper for a long time, and then I got using the torch a little more and learning more about it. A guy helped teach me on it, but all that area in there was given the opportunity to use natural gas, but hell we had pipes this big around. Every fifth length of pipe, we'd have to put in what's called a wrinklebelly. It was a pipe that'd been compressed so it was wrinkley like so. Because they was all hooked solid and anytime metal is heated it expands, and when it cools it compresses again. Those wrinklebellies would absorb that expansion and contraction. Every fifth length we had to put one of those. It was just like the other pipe only it had those wrinklebellies in the middle of them. Clear around the pipe you know? There was one guy that was single, and he saved all his money. He bought a Model-A Ford. One of the first Model-A Fords that come out, built by the Ford motor company. It would do 60 miles an hour! It was unheard of. Everybody was aghast. Each one of that whole crew, there was about 30 of us in the crew that put those pipelines through there, paid this guy a dollar a piece to get to ride in his Model-A Ford up to 60 miles an hour. He'd get it up to 60 miles an hour, and the telephone poles looked like a picket fence. It seemed like, you know? It was awful fast compared to what you was used to riding. That was quite a thrill. We helped pay his car off that way!

We ate mostly what you raised yourself. Apples. We always had bacon, ham, apples, potatoes, and lots of beans. Mother always made good bread. We didn't really get awful hungry. I mean we got by pretty well. I made one little machine and put it on the back of an old Star 4-cylinder car. I took the body off the back part, and built a little flat rack on it. Mounted a grain grinding machine on it, run a belt down through the floorboards, around the drive shaft, put a pulley on the drive shaft, so we'd drive to where we was going to

chop grain, and back it up against the granary, jack up the right rear wheel. One wheel could go, and the other not. That's the way a car's built in the differential of the back end. You jack up the rear wheel, and then we had a tightener on the belt that would tighten the belt up around the driveline. It was open. It wasn't like these closed drive shafts. It would revolve. That would run the chopper. You'd have one guy dumping the grain in, and we made a square box of wood across the back with a slide in the top of one hole in this square hole. Then you'd hang one bag here, and one bag here, and as long as you were grinding, you'd have this slot pulled this way, filling this sack, and the other guy would be with a six gallon can carrying the grain out, and mixing it. One of oats, one of wheat, two of barley, whatever mixture the farmer wanted. We'd drive around chopping grain. When this sack got full, you'd push that thing over, and it would feed the next sack while you unhooked this bag, and took it in and dumped it in the bin and come back and hook it back on, and the other one would be full, and you'd shove the gadget back over to fill this sack, and you'd grab that one, and go up the steps and dump it in the bin. Do you know what we charged? Eight cents for 100 pounds. You'd just work your tail off. We chopped several ton that way. When we got done, we'd just loosen the belt, let that right rear wheel down, jump in the car, and drive to someone else's place.

I built a wood saw on a Model-T Ford. We run the shaft straight out the back to the saw, and made a table that would go criss-cross the back of the pick-up, not a pick-up really. It didn't have any walls on the sides or anything. It was just a flatbed. But, it would slide back and forth, and one guy up there would grab the end of the log as you went through sawing, then he'd throw the block over into the pile. You'd pull the table back, and move the log out another length, and go through; we'd have two guys hand it up to you. We could just saw like mad. It took two guys to keep up with that. To keep the wood on the table you know. That was done with a straight shaft to the saw. No belts.

Never had anybody out saw us, but the next year after we built that, and went around to all these wood piles sawing them up, we'd saw them for six dollars a cord. That's a lot of wood. Six dollars was big pay! There was two handing up the wood, one working the table, one taking blocks off. Six dollars a cord.

A cord is a pile 4 feet wide, 4 feet high, and 8 feet long. We'd stack them. The next year, after we did that, and had so much fun, and we was making a little money, and nobody else was, there was 21 in these 3 towns, Redmond, Salina, and Aurora, 21 outfits. We could out-saw any of them. That's no kidding.

They either didn't know how to sharpen their saws or something, but we could just saw circles around any of them. We got most of the work. What other machines did I make? They used to chop corn, and put it in silo, you know. You raise the corn. Then you chop it up and blow it in, and pack it tight, and it cures like tobacco shall we say? It does turn brown, and cures it. Well, I built the first ones for Orvil Andrews. They lived here in town, and had a big farm, a lot of cattle. This machine that I'm telling you about, they'd go out in the field, and this machine has nothing to do with out in the field, but they had to bind it. It'd bind it in bundles about that big around. That's heavy, because they are 8-10 feet tall you know. They are green. They'd pile it on wagons like you haul hay, and haul it into the pit. You always had a big deep pit to cure it in. To make this silage for cattle. I made this machine on the edge of this pit. With a car engine, we didn't have tractors then, they could bring that corn in on these wagons, and shove it in this machine a bundle at a time, and it'd chop it up in pieces, and blow it over in that pit. Just blow it, blow it. They had horses in there leading them back and forth tromping that to compress it while it was blowing it in there. I made the first one in this valley. For Orvil Andrews. He's the one that asked for it. I don't know why they come to me to build it, but they did.

Then, I had an adventure with the power company. Telluride Power Company. Don Cooper used to work for them. See he was the electrician who handled a lot of this area around here. Repairs, and whatever. They hate to have to walk up and down these poles to do their work. He come to me, and wanted to know if I couldn't invent him some kind of machine to get up there to do the work on the power lines without having to climb up and down those poles. So, I did. I made him one that's a big ladder about 18 inches wide with rounds all the way up. I hinged it to lay out on the cab of the truck. They did start having pick-ups then. You turn a crank down here, like yo yo yo yo yo. The cable would pull that thing, and then you straighten it up like that, then you could lock it and he could just go up that ladder and do his work, and come back down, and uncrank it, and it would lay out over the pick- up. Next thing you know, they come out with all these hole digging outfits, and baskets to get up there and all these fancy things. But, I built the first one. I'm not kidding.