

CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY
The 1930s Migration to the Southern San Joaquin ValleyOral History Program

Interview Between

INTERVIEWEE:	Earl F. Smith
PLACE OF BIRTH:	Dubuque, Dubuque County, Iowa
INTERVIEWER:	Michael Neely
DATES OF INTERVIEWS:	April 16, 1981
PLACE OF INTERVIEWS:	Bakersfield, Kern County
NUMBER OF TAPES:	2
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Preface

Mr. Smith is a neat and trim man with a distinct military bearing. A former Army officer and later, a member of the California Highway Patrol, he has tremendous personal dignity. Although he is 79 years old, he still works and is active and alert. He and his charming wife live in a comfortable home in southwest Bakersfield. Mr. Smith was a Ford tractor salesman during the 1930s and traveled through the dust bowl area. His recollections are relevant and vivid. Our interview was interrupted several times by a neighbor's lawn mower. Mr. and Mrs. Smith are very gracious people and were a pleasure to visit.

Michael Neely
Interviewer

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INTERVIEWEE: Earl F. Smith (Age: 79)

INTERVIEWER: Michael Neely

DATED: April 16, 1981

M.N.: This is an interview with Mr. Earl Smith for the California State College, Bakersfield CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY Project by Michael Neely at 1216 Antonia Way, Bakersfield, California on April 16, 1981 at 2:00 p.m.

M.N.: Let's start out with what year you were born and where.

Smith: Well, I was born in Dubuque, Iowa in 1901.

M.N.: What was Dubuque like then?

Smith: Oh, it was a regular small town. It's about 20,000 population. We considered it a pretty good size town of course in those days.

M.N.: How long had your family lived there?

Smith: Well, my father and mother were married there. My father was born there. I don't know where my mother was born. I think it was out in western Iowa.

M.N.: But they'd been there for some time?

Smith: Oh, yes. Family was there, my grandfather on my father's side was a Civil War veteran. The place that he got there was what they called in those days a homestead which was given to soldiers who had served in the Civil War.

M.N.: Did your family live in town?

Smith: Yes.

M.N.: How long did you live there before you left?

Smith: Well, I left there in 1918 after I'd finished school. My folks

had moved to Colorado on a ranch.

M.N.: You left there after your parents had gone?

Smith: Yes, I stayed there. They left there I think in 1915. My dad homesteaded land in northeastern Well County in Colorado.

M.N.: Did you stay there until you were 18 to finish school?

Smith: Yes.

M.N.: That was unusual wasn't it?

Smith: It was in those days, yes. Most kids after they get out of grade school, they went to work. I was in college when I quit and came out west.

M.N.: How long did you go to school?

Smith: Let's see, this was a combination high school and college and I went there for six years from the time I got out of grade school. In those days it wasn't considered high school. It was considered an eight year college is what they called it.

M.N.: What did you do then after you left?

Smith: Lived on a ranch in Colorado for a while. Then I got tired of the lonesomeness. It was about 15 miles from the nearest neighbor. I was about 21 when I left. Went to a little town in Colorado called Eaton. Went to work for the sugar company there and finally my folks gave up this ranching idea. My dad never was a rancher anyhow and moved to Cheyenne. And I later came up to Cheyenne and lived with them and that's where I was married.

M.N.: What year was that?

Smith: 1925. I must have been 23 or 24 I think.

M.N.: How old was your wife when you married?

Smith: Just over 21. We've been married 56 years this coming June.

M.N.: How old are you now?

Smith: Well, next I'll be 80 years old.

M.N.: That's kind of unusual. You got an unusual amount of schooling and then you were older than most people when you got married.

Smith: Well, they didn't consider it older in those days. Darn few people got married under 21 or 22 years old unless there was necessity.

M.N.: I was thinking about your wife. Many of the people I've talked to married, the women married when they were 15, 16, or 17 years old.

Smith: Yeah, a lot of them did.

M.N.: What did you do after you were married?

Smith: Oh, various things. I drove a bus just before I got married. I was driving a taxi trying to go to a business school at the same time.

M.N.: What kind of business school?

Smith: Well, it was where they taught bookkeeping, typing and shorthand and things like that.

M.N.: Why all this schooling?

Smith: I don't know.

M.N.: Part of your nature?

Smith: Just part of my nature. I always thought that I wanted to be an office worker.

M.N.: Did that work out eventually?

Smith: Well, to some extent, yes. My wife's folks were from Kansas City and we went out there to visit after the first son was born and got talked into staying in Kansas City. We went out there in 1928 and I went to work for the Ford Motor Company. I was a clerk in what they called the claims receiving department where they brought defective parts in from the dealers. And they later put me out on the road as a service representative.

M.N.: When did that start?

Smith: 1930.

M.N.: How long did you do that?

Smith: Till World War II. They closed the plant there and moved us to Detroit.

M.N.: What did you do in World War II?

Smith: I was in the Army.

M.N.: Were you drafted?

Smith: No, I volunteered. I volunteered to keep from being drafted to be quite frank with you. I was afraid that they might draft me.

M.N.: What happened in World War II?

Smith: Well, I served in the Army for about four years.

M.N.: Were you an officer or enlisted?

Smith: I was an officer. I was commissioned out of civilian life because of the technical knowledge that I had at the Ford Motor Company. There were quite a few people from both General Motors and Ford that were commissioned for skills that the Army needed that they didn't have and couldn't get. So I was offered a commission and I thought, "Maybe I'd better take it rather than be drafted."

M.N.: It worked out all right?

Smith: Yeah, it worked out fine.

M.N.: What did you do?

Smith: Well, I don't know what the technical name would be for it. I was an administrative officer for the entire term. I served at headquarters all the time I was in the Army. First I was at Washington, D.C. at the Pentagon Building, then they moved this whole unit to Detroit and in Detroit they split it up and sent this unit I was with out to different service commands. I was sent to Fort Douglas in Salt Lake City at the headquarters.

M.N.: What did you do there?

Smith: I was an administrative officer. I had charge of all the administrative vehicles for all post camps and stations in the western half of the United States.

M.N.: The western half of the United States?

Smith: Let's see, it was for Colorado, Nebraska, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, California.

M.N.: It seems like a pretty large area.

Smith: Well, they had nine service commands and the ninth was the largest of the bunch because of the western territory.

M.N.: What was your rank?

Smith: I started as a first lieutenant and was later promoted to captain.

M.N.: Were you a captain when you left the service?

Smith: Yeah, I got a promotion after I left the service to major but it never amounted to anything. It was just a gesture on the part of the Army.

M.N.: After the service?

Smith: I went back to the Ford Motor Company. In fact, I never left them. I was on military leave all the time I was gone.

M.N.: Was that unusual or was that fairly common?

Smith: Oh no, that was fairly common in all companies that people who were in the service were on military leave. You didn't lose any seniority. All companies that I knew of did the same thing. All the men from Ford that were in the service were reinstated there without loss of seniority and I'm sure General Motors and Chrysler all did the same thing and other manufacturers too.

M.N.: So did you continue then working for Ford Motor Company until you retired?

Smith: No, I worked for them till 1950 and I bought a dealership in Idaho in partnership with another fellow.

M.N.: How old were you at that time?

Smith: I must have been 49 then in 1950. I was born in 1901. So I stayed in that for about two or three years and I didn't like this partnership arrangement so I sold out to him and came to California. It was 1954 when I came out here.

M.N.: What did you do in California?

Smith: Well, we owned this small store, my wife and I. We sold it in I think 1959 and I went to work for the state, the California Highway Patrol, as a commercial vehicle inspector.

M.N.: How old were you when you started with the California Highway Patrol?

Smith: 59.

M.N.: 59 years old--wasn't that fairly old for them to be hiring?

Smith: Oh no, they had no restriction on age if you had the qualifications and you could stay with them until you were 70 years old but I retired at 68.

M.N.: Skipped out early, huh?

Smith: Yeah, well I had had enough of it.

M.N.: And then what did you do?

Smith: Just retired, just nothing.

M.N.: Have you worked since then?

Smith: Only part-time with the security company.

M.N.: So you still work even now?

Smith: Yeah, occasionally.

M.N.: At almost 80 years of age.

Smith: Yeah, why not?

M.N.: Well, let's go back and talk about the years of the dust bowl. Now you were traveling around during that period weren't you?

Smith: Yeah, I traveled in the state of Kansas for almost ten years for Ford and quite a bit of it in the western section of the state all the way from Wichita on west.

M.N.: What year did you start?

Smith: Well, I started in November 1930.

M.N.: Was there a dust bowl at that time?

Smith: No, no, it didn't develop until about 1932.

M.N.: Well, can you describe to me what the country was like before the dust bowl?

Smith: Well, it was a typical farming country out there except that the farms were quite large.

M.N.: Can you help me picture what a farm would look like?

Smith: Well, a farm out there generally consisted of at least 640 acres and maybe a farmer would have 640 acres of wheat which he would harvest and there would be dozens of farms like that in that part of the country. That wasn't considered anything very big at all. That was just a normal amount of ground that a farmer would need to make a good living out of.

M.N.: When you think of those families what do you think of? What do you see?

Smith: Well, I see people that live on a farm and have an automobile and have kids, the kids go to school. A lot of them went to school in one room school houses for their elementary education.

M.N.: Would they have a new car?

Smith: Generally, yes, they would have. Well, there were very few used cars in those days. Those were in the days of the Model T and the Model A. Chevrolets were small.

M.N.: Did they have machinery on the farms?

Smith: Oh yes, those farms had to be mechanized.

M.N.: When did the mechanization start?

Smith: In about 1930 they started, well, it depends on what you mean by mechanization.

M.N.: Tractors.

Smith: Well, not too many of them had tractors prior to about 1930. Their machinery was drawn by horses. I remember seeing pictures out there of what they called harvesters harvesting wheat and there would be one harvester following the other around the farmer's field. Each machine was drawn by about twelve horses.

M.N.: But when did they start using these machines?

Smith: Well, I don't know, that was pretty early.

M.N.: They'd been there for some time.

Smith: Yes. There was everything from a binder which was used for binding the wheat and later on they got what they called a header which would come along and snip the heads off of the stocks into what they called a header barge and it was stacked until it was dried and then it was harvested with a harvester and then later on there was what they called a combine harvester which cut the wheat and harvested it at the same time.

M.N.: They usually had those machines on the farm.

Smith: Yes, they pretty near had to have those.

M.N.: Were these rich people we are talking about?

Smith: Well, they were well off. No, they weren't rich. They lived on their farms. They're not like these guys nowadays that live in town and hire somebody else to do their farming for them. They lived on their farms. Most of them were brought up on farms. They were born and raised on these places.

M.N.: Did you ever get into Oklahoma or Texas or Missouri?

Smith: Missouri, yes.

M.N.: What was Missouri like?

Smith: Well, Missouri is much different country there. The places are smaller and if a man had 80 acres in Missouri why he had a pretty

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M.N.: What was Missouri like?

Smith: Well, Missouri is much different country there. The places are smaller and if a man had 80 acres in Missouri why he had a pretty

good size farm where in eastern Kansas you could go up to about 160 acres and as you got out farther west it would be either 320 or 640 acres, a full section.

M.N.: Did they have as much mechanization on the small farm in Missouri?

Smith: Well, no. I've seen a lot of those farmers out there plowing with a mule.

M.N.: Were they as well off as the farmers with the larger farms?

Smith: Yes, they were. Their requirements were less. Their expenses were much less. Those places were what they called self-sustained. They had their own dairy products and they raised everything they ate except staples such as wheat and things like that. Where in the western farms why they were specialists. They raised either barley or wheat or something like that and then they sell these crops, get the cash and go buy what they needed to live on.

M.N.: Now this is 1930. What about the Depression?

Smith: Well, yes, it was beginning to show up in 1931.

M.N.: I thought it was in 1929.

Smith: Well no, the Depression really didn't start then. The stock market crash was in 1929 but really we didn't see anything of the Depression until late 1931 or 1932 along in there.

M.N.: Why was that?

Smith: Well, it just took that much longer to be noticed. In the east of course it was more noticeable because people were out of work but in these small communities in section of country I was in with the exception of Kansas City and Wichita, they were all small towns.

M.N.: I had the impression that the Depression, the Crash, was a quick thing and then just overnight everything changed.

Smith: Oh no. A lot of people lost a lot of money and all that stuff but as far as the Depression was concerned it wasn't noticeable until prices began to drop. I remember in western Kansas in 1931 the farmers had a bumper crop of wheat. Every one of them had a beautiful crop and the price of wheat dropped to 25¢ a bushel and the guys were stuck with it. It cost them maybe 50¢ to 60¢ a bushel to raise.

M.N.: So what happened to them?

Smith: Well, they just had to sell it for what they could get out of it. That's all there was to it and a lot of them, well they all lost

money, there's no question about that, but there wasn't very many of those people that lost their farms there. The people that lost their properties were mostly down in Oklahoma and the eastern part of the state where they had the small farms.

M.N.: So the small farmers were the ones hardest hit by it. Is that because they had less reserve?

Smith: Well, they had no reserve.

M.N.: Is that what you would call subsistence farmers?

Smith: Yeah, the eastern part of the state was mostly subsistence farmers and they depended, well all the farmers in those days depended on loans from the banks. They would borrow the money in the spring to operate their farms and pay it back in the fall when the crops were harvested. When the Great Depression hit and the prices fell so low, these people couldn't meet their notes at the bank.

M.N.: Oh, the banks were pretty generous.

Smith: The banks went broke themselves. There wasn't anything they could do about it. A lot of banks closed.

M.N.: This is in what year? What years did the banks start closing?

Smith: Well, they started closing in 1931 and then when Roosevelt was elected they had the bank moratorium in 1932.

M.N.: What's a bank moratorium?

Smith: Well, all banks were closed for three or four days or something like that and then a lot of them never did open.

M.N.: You mean they just closed completely?

Smith: Well, they were out of assets. Liabilities exceeded their assets.

M.N.: That's fine but what did the people do?

Smith: Well, what could you do? Your money was tied up in the bank, your savings, they were lost.

M.N.: But people had to do something, what did they do?

Smith: They just went without. Well, some people had jobs of course with enterprises that didn't close, but farmers--I'm talking mostly about farmers--when they couldn't meet their notes, the banks had to foreclose on them.

M.N.: Took their land away?

Smith: They had to take their land. There was a lot of property that the banks let the people stay on maybe, but they lost the title to them and that's when the great migration to California started.

M.N.: I know we're talking about a number of things that happened then not just the dust bowl or bad weather, we're talking also, it seems to me about economic conditions and the banks taking the land.

Smith: Well, the banks had to take the land. The property was mortgaged to the bank and the only thing the bank could do was foreclose on it. Then the banks, when the banks couldn't sell the property for anything, why eventually the banks had to close.

M.N.: How did this affect you personally?

Smith: Personally, not at all. I never lost a day's work during the whole thing. Our wages were small.

M.N.: What did you get paid at that time?

Smith: Well, I went to work for Ford in 1928 at \$5 a day for an eight hour day, five days a week and gradually was raised until I was getting almost \$1 an hour and then they put me on salary at \$150 a month and I was traveling for them. Well, when the Great Depression really hit in 1933, they lowered our wages back to where we started.

M.N.: \$5 a day?

Smith: \$5 a day.

M.N.: Could you get by on that?

Smith: Of course you could get by on it. There wasn't anything else to do but get by on it.

M.N.: Was that a big problem?

Smith: Not if you were economically inclined. You lived on what you had. What else could you do? You didn't eat steak. You might go out and buy stew meat and have stew. You ate well but you didn't have anything fancy. You didn't take extensive vacations at anyplace or anything like that. You just tightened your belt and lived on what you had. There was nothing to help you. There was no such thing as this welfare business, no such thing. Absolutely no welfare. The only welfare around were soup kitchens where people out of work, mostly single persons, could go and get a meal.

M.N.: Was that demeaning when they went? Was it humiliating?

Smith: Not to them, no mostly bums and young people.

M.N.: Would you have gone to a soup kitchen?

Smith: If I had had to, but I was married at that time. I had other people to think about. When this thing really hit in 1932, 1933 we had three children and I was lucky. As I say, I worked all the time but there was hundreds and hundreds of people who were out of work.

M.N.: Were friends of yours out of work?

Smith: Oh yes.

M.N.: How did they handle it?

Smith: Well, we had one neighbor that I remember distinctly. We were very friendly with, in fact, he's dead now but his wife still writes to us. She lives down along the Lake of the Ozarks in Missouri. He and a friend of his who had a small Model T truck would go down to the market and buy vegetables and peddle them to the people along the street.

M.N.: For whatever they could get?

Smith: Yeah, money enough for groceries.

M.N.: How much would it cost you a day to get by?

Smith: Well, if you were making \$5 a day, that would be \$40 a week, that's what you had to live on.

M.N.: About what was the cost of living at that time?

Smith: Well, if you paid for a house about like this one, your rent would be about \$25 a month.

M.N.: A nice house?

Smith: Yeah, and I remember distinctly that when I was traveling after this thing started up again that we'd go shopping on Saturday to buy the bulk of the groceries that we needed for the week and if we paid out over \$5 or \$6 for a week's supply of necessities, why we were splurging.

M.N.: So you had a fairly comfortable income then.

Smith: Oh yes, it was enough to get along on, yeah.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1

M.N.: Did things go on and get better at that time?

Smith: Gradually, yes, from 1929 on to about 1933 things went downhill year after year and then after about 1934 on to the time that World War II broke out it gradually began to get a little bit better every year. Crops began to get better, the results of the bad weather had eased off so that farmers could raise their crops again so that economic conditions began to get much better after about 1934, 1935.

M.N.: In 1935 or whenever it was at its worse, is there any particular thing that stands out that would indicate how bad things were?

Smith: You mean economic conditions? No, I don't think so. There were a lot of people out of work and after Roosevelt got in and he started this WPA [Works Progress Administration] and projects like that it put a lot of people to work and while they didn't make a lot of money, they made enough to live on. It kept them off of the bread lines and kept people from starving to death.

M.N.: Was it Hoover's fault that they had a Depression?

Smith: Ah, they blamed it on Hoover but it wasn't Hoover's fault. It was things that were just coming to a head. People were living beyond their means, that's all there was to it.

M.N.: What do you mean by that?

Smith: Well, people were speculating in the stock market, things that are forbidden nowadays that there's laws against them. But a guy could go out and buy stock on the margin. They pay 10% down on the stuff and depend on the price of the stock going up and sell and make money. A lot of them were millionaires on paper and didn't have 15¢ in cash. And when the stocks would drop, the brokers would demand more margin from these people. The more they got into it and the stocks kept going down and the people didn't have enough of a margin in the stock that they had bought so they'd lose it.

M.N.: So it just went deeper and deeper.

Smith: Just kept trying to dig themselves out of the hole and going back down deeper and deeper all the time. That's what caused the stock market crash. Hoover had nothing to do with that. He was a good man, he was a damn poor politician but he was a good man.

M.N.: Why do you say he was a poor politician?

Smith: Well, he didn't play politics you know. Roosevelt was a politician. He could talk you out of your shirt. Hoover couldn't do that. He was too much of a practical man.

M.N.: Was he a bad President?

Smith: I don't think so.

M.N.: Did you vote for him?

Smith: No. I voted for Al Smith but he got the blame for a lot of this stuff that he couldn't help and they wouldn't listen to him when he did try to tell them that they were doing things wrong.

M.N.: Was public opinion against him?

Smith: Oh yes, definitely.

M.N.: So Roosevelt won on a landslide.

Smith: Oh yes, yes.

M.N.: Did it help things then when Roosevelt got elected?

Smith: Yes, it put a lot of people to work on some of these projects that he had. He had what they call a WPA. I think that a guy's salary would be about \$15 a week working on the thing but he was doing something and he was making enough to eat on. Then they had these projects, what the heck do they call them--CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] camps? Took these young fellows into these camps and they made a lot of improvements in public lands. They got a small wage and they got their living expenses. It was like being in the army. They were out and away from everything but they weren't hanging around pool halls. They were earning a little bit of money.

M.N.: Was everybody satisfied with Roosevelt?

Smith: Oh yes. They must have been, they elected him time after time.

M.N.: Were his measures to correct the economic problems hard on people?

Smith: No, they weren't after he got things straightened out and started up hill, no they were not hard on people. You've got to remember that people in those days had to depend on themselves. They had nobody to look to if they had no welfare, no free medical attention or anything like that and they did with what they had. That was it.

M.N.: There was a weather problem.

Smith: There was, yeah, that started back in 1932.

M.N.: What was good weather like, good conditions?

Smith: Good conditions depends on what part of the country you're in. Now eastern Kansas, Missouri were parts of the country where you had ample rain. It was what you'd call a wet country. Western Kansas, middle and western Kansas and Colorado were mostly dry country.

You didn't get too much rainfall and weather conditions were a heck of a lot different out in that part of the country than they were in the eastern part.

M.N.: Did they irrigate? Is that how they got their moisture?

Smith: No, there was no irrigation until you got out into the mountain country. The moisture was what rain you got in the spring of the year and from the snows in the winter. Farmers in that part of the country would plant what they called fall wheat or winter wheat. They'd plant their wheat in the fall and they could pasture their animals on the wheat. During the winter it would sprout and then it would grow in the spring and mature early.

M.N.: That same wheat would grow all winter.

Smith: Well, yeah, it lay dormant after the snows came, you know. It would be covered with snow, but as soon as the snow was off why it began to germinate again. It matured early before the heat and the dry weather came on. The only thing that the farmer had to worry about were sudden electrical storms that would come up sometimes in the late spring or the early summer, hail storms which could wipe them out. But they usually carried insurance against that and then from then on it was dry until the fall.

M.N.: They didn't get much rainfall during the summer?

Smith: No. In the western part of the country there was very little rainfall. The farmer had to depend on the spring rains to bring his crop around. If he had a dry spring why he was out of luck.

M.N.: What did he grow during the summer?

Smith: Nothing. The farmers in the west there in that dry country were wheat farmers or grain farmers and after they harvested their crop in July, mostly in late June and early July, then they began to prepare their ground again for the fall crop when they'd plant their wheat again.

M.N.: How did the weather first begin to change?

Smith: I can't tell you that, it was such a gradual thing. It began to get dry and the wind began to blow.

M.N.: What year was that?

Smith: Of course, in the western part of Kansas and Colorado and those states you have a constant wind anyhow but the winds began to increase and a lot of the bad weather was caused by the wind and dryness.

M.N.: Had that happened before?

Smith: It had yes but not to the extent that it did during this one period that we're talking about where it was constant as a result of maybe a couple of years of dry weather. Now there wasn't only Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas and some of those places. It was in the western parts of Nebraska and the Dakotas. A lot of the dust we'll be talking about came from the Dakotas, the Bad Lands in the Dakotas--that dust was blown clear on across down into Mexico I guess.

M.N.: Was there any other thing that caused it to get dry other than the weather?

Smith: No, that was the cause of it. As I say the winds began to increase, I can't understand why or don't know why. Didn't pay any attention to it I guess but the winds were bad enough so that it would blow the top soil off of the crops that were growing and leave the roots exposed.

M.N.: When do you remember that it really began to be noticed as a problem?

Smith: Oh, 1931 and 1932 it was bad in the western part of Kansas and Missouri, Nebraska. So bad that it was hard to breathe many days.

M.N.: Were you out on the road at this time?

Smith: Oh yes, I was traveling for the company at that time. You wore a mask over your mouth and nose to keep the dust out.

M.N.: What was it doing to the farmers?

Smith: Well, it just blew their crops right out from under them. A farmer would have his winter crops that we're talking about, for example, his winter wheat would be coming along fine and in the spring this wind came up and it would just blow the soil out from around the crop-- just blows the topsoil off.

M.N.: And leave the plant sitting there?

Smith: Leave the plants dead.

M.N.: What did the farmers do?

Smith: Well, they went broke. A lot of them left their farms. They had to. The banks took their farms back. They just went to rack and ruin.

M.N.: Well, now this was also at a time when the Depression was at its worse.

Smith: Oh yes, yes. That was part of the Depression. The fact that the

weather went bad along with the stock market crash and the people losing their money and these winds came up and that was the climax, that was the cause of the abandoning of a lot of those farms. A farmer couldn't make it. He had to abandon.

M.N.: Was there anything in particular that the farmers did to try and stop the erosion of the land?

Smith: Later on they did. They changed the direction of their row crops especially in parts of the country where they would raise what they called row crops, corn and things like that, mostly corn. They changed the direction of their rows so that the wind couldn't blow down the rows and blow everything out and have to blow across the crops but mostly the wheat farmers, they couldn't do a doggone thing. They just had to let it go. They depended on rain and rain didn't come and the soil just blew away.

M.N.: What did these farms look like in the worst of these conditions? Did you visit some of them?

Smith: Well, you couldn't help but see them as you drove along the highways. We didn't have super highways in those days, mostly in the western part of the state there were what they call gravel roads. It was very little hard top, just gravel. The wind would be blowing so hard that you could hardly see--like being in a blizzard. It would stack up against a farmer's fence to the point where I've seen four wire fences completely covered with dirt.

M.N.: Were the people still able to live on the farms?

Smith: Well, they could live on them, yes, the same as they could in towns. It was just as bad in towns as it was on the farms. The dirt blowing in the cities. I've seen it rain mud.

M.N.: Where was that?

Smith: I remember one time distinctly in Colby, Kansas there was a storm came up in the evening and it rained for about fifteen minutes real hard and there was nothing coming down but balls of mud.

M.N.: It wasn't like rain at all.

Smith: It wasn't rain at all it was just balls of mud falling because the air was filled with dirt way up into the higher elevations and all. As I say, a lot of this dust and stuff came in from the Dakotas and places like that you know where they have constant wind in those states.

M.N.: That didn't stay dusty all the time. It was for a couple of days and then it cleared up wouldn't it?

Smith: Not very much.

M.N.: You mean it stayed dusty?

Smith: It stayed dusty. The wind blew constantly and kept blowing the dust all day long, all night long. It was bad enough that sometimes you couldn't see the sun.

M.N.: You mean it was like it would be dark during the day?

Smith: Well, it would be hazy, maybe you could see a ball of fire in the sky and that's about all you could see.

M.N.: What color was this dust, was it brown?

Smith: Yeah, it was brown, just dirty looking brown stuff--soil.

M.N.: What other kinds of problems did it cause?

Smith: Well, mostly it caused loss of crops and loss of topsoil on these farms. See the top soil is what they count on for their crops, the under soil could be clay or something like that but the good soil is on top. It retains the moisture and gives the ground the ability to grow things and when that's blown off, it exposes the under-soil and it's just no good.

M.N.: What was it like in the towns?

Smith: Just dirty and dusty. Dust blowing all the time and people had to stay in as much as they possibly could to keep out of it.

M.N.: What would happen if you went outside?

Smith: Well, it's just like you'd be out in a strong wind full of dust. We used to compare it in those days with a snow blizzard only it was dust blowing instead of the snow.

M.N.: It would irritate your eyes, your nose.

Smith: Oh yes, your nose, your breathing. I've gone into a hotel at night, taken off my clothes and beaten my suit with a coat hanger, beat the dust out of it it would be so bad.

M.N.: Was the dust in the room?

Smith: Of course, they cleaned the rooms everyday but in the morning when you got up there was dust all over everything. They'd shake the bed clothes and shake the dust out of the bed clothes. I'm not talking about old shack hotels, I'm talking about first class hotels too.

M.N.: There was nothing people could do to get away from it.

Smith: No, you couldn't get away from it. There wasn't any of those

buildings built tight enough to keep that stuff out. You just couldn't keep it out.

M.N.: So the farms just got silted over.

Smith: Well, yeah. The topsoil from a farmer's land would go up against his fence, cover his fence, cover his machinery. I've seen tractors completely covered with dirt. In that part of the country as dry as the air is, machinery don't rust as fast as it does in a wet part and very few people had closed buildings for their machinery. They'd just pull them up into the yard and let them sit and the dust would completely cover a guy's tractor or maybe his wagon or his hay rack would be buried in dirt, dust blown off of his field.

M.N.: Did you ever talk to any of these farmers about it?

Smith: Well no, not particularly. You could talk to a dealer and his tale was sad enough that you didn't want to hear anybody else's because he couldn't do any business because people didn't have any money so they couldn't buy automobiles. They were dang lucky to buy enough to live on.

M.N.: How would these farmers pull up stakes, do you remember?

Smith: Well, if they lost their farm, a lot of them, as I say, just left.

M.N.: Just up and go?

Smith: Yeah, they just moved to town, some of them. A lot of them as I say moved west. We used to see them camped along the highways. Called them "tin can tourists". There would be a carload of people that would be always driving west and at night they'd pull off the side of the road and either sleep in their cars or they'd have some kind of a lean-to. They'd fashion themselves someplace to sleep and lived out of tin cans. Then after they left in the morning you'd see a bunch of rubbish and tin cans lying around there where they didn't even clean up after themselves.

M.N.: Were they thought of in a harsh way by people?

Smith: No, not particularly, they didn't bother anybody. They just moved on and did no harm to anybody. They bought what they could.

M.N.: Did they steal?

Smith: No, I didn't know of anybody doing any stealing. They were ordinary people. They weren't thieves. They were just people who were dispossessed and they had no place to go.

M.N.: Looked to me like people in that condition today would steal.

Smith: Oh sure, I'm sure they would. It's a different generation than it

was then. In those days a farmer never locked his house. He never thought of it. A lot of people in town never locked their houses. Got to depend on your neighbors to be honest. You didn't have to worry about them coming in and taking anything. Nowadays of course you can't do that but those were different times.

M.N.: What about the effects of the dust on people? Did people get sick as a result of the dust?

Smith: I can't say as to that. I never noticed any ill effects from it and I was in quite a bit of it.

M.N.: The reason I was saying that I remember one farmer saying that his stock began to get real poor.

Smith: Oh yes, the stock would get poor mainly because the feed that they had was full of dust and there was no way that they would keep it out.

M.N.: Let's get back to your impression of the tin can tourists. Were these people just passing through?

Smith: Yes, generally they were moving on west. They had no place else to go. They probably were moved off of their farms. Either they lost the farms or they couldn't make it.

M.N.: Were those people particularly tragic?

Smith: Yes, they were. They had lost all of their possessions except what they were traveling with and just wanted someplace to make a living I guess. They were moving west.

M.N.: Was there any kind of government help for them?

Smith: No government help, no sir.

M.N.: Did people give them handouts as they went along?

Smith: I don't remember anybody begging. These people all seemed to have enough to get along on, to buy their gasoline and once and a while maybe some outfit would have to sell some of their possessions or ask for a handout but generally they got along fairly well.

M.N.: Were they ever run out of a town?

Smith: Oh no, they didn't stop in towns. They generally pulled off the highway and camped.

M.N.: Did people think of them as bums?

Smith: No, they weren't bums. They were honest people. They were trying to get along. I don't know of any cases where any of them were of

the rougher element that would hold up anybody or steal from you.

M.N.: So they weren't poorly thought of.

Smith: Oh no, no they were just people in poor circumstances. Things they couldn't control.

M.N.: When you went out through the countryside, would you see a lot of vacant farms?

Smith: Oh yes, a lot of abandoned farms.

M.N.: Did those people come back and try to reclaim their farms?

Smith: In later years I understand quite a few of them did but that was after World War II that a lot of them came back. A lot of these people who moved to California went back to their places in Oklahoma and western Kansas but the big farmers out there, the guys that had a lot of land, well, they were deeply in debt and in poor circumstances they had managed to retain their farms mainly because there was no market for them. You couldn't sell one for 25¢ an acre you know because nobody had the money to buy it. So a lot of them kept them. The banks allowed them to keep them and they gradually came out of it. The dry spell was broken and they gradually got their farms in shape before they could raise something on them.

M.N.: When was the dust the absolute worst?

Smith: I think it was in 1932, 1931 and early 1932 was the worst.

M.N.: Did it just gradually start getting better?

Smith: Yeah, as the winds died down and you got a few rains why it cleared up the air. Now occasionally you would have a dust storm, don't misunderstand me. I'm talking about the time when the dust blew every day and every night, all day long, day after day after day.

M.N.: That was in 1932?

Smith: Yeah. Later on, of course to this day, you get dust storms occasionally in that part of the country. The winds will come up and the weather is dry and it blows. That's just part of living out in that country. This stuff died away. Occasionally I remember in 1934 or 1935 through there that there would be a dust storm a day or two of dust blowing especially in the late summer before the rains came.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2

M.N.: So the people just gradually got things under control again.

Smith: Gradually it came back to where it got better. They were able to

raise a few crops and prices stabilized so that a farmer could make a few bucks to live on. It took more than a couple of years. It took about three to four years for things to get back to normal.

M.N.: Do you think the dust storms had played a large part?

Smith: Oh definitely, definitely. It destroyed so much land that it took time for the land to come back.

M.N.: And that had an effect on the whole country?

Smith: Oh yes and on that part of the country that was affected by it-- Kansas, Oklahoma, the Dakotas.

M.N.: How did all ths affect you personally when you were living at this time?

Smith: Well, not too badly. I worked all the time. I was employed.

M.N.: Did it make it hard for you to do your job?

Smith: Well yes, it was rough on the dealers and it was rough on the automobile companies too. If the people don't have the money to buy merchandise then they can't sell it and as far as the dealers were concerned there was very few of them went broke but they had to change their methods of operation.

M.N.: How was that?

Smith: Well, they went in more for service and improved their service departments where they could pay more attention to fixing a man's automobile rather than selling him a new one.

M.N.: Were you trying to sell cars at that time?

Smith: No, I was in the service department. I was training mechanics and teaching dealers how to operate a service department properly.

M.N.: So your skills went along with what was needed at that time.

Smith: Yes.

M.N.: That was fortunate for you.

Smith: That was very fortunate because I personally am a very poor salesman.

M.N.: What kind of mechanical problems did you see at that time?

Smith: Well, the dust of course ruined a lot of engines, automobile engines because people didn't have sense enough to change the oil filters. Though there was no such thing as oil filters, there were air

cleaners to keep the dust out of the carburetors. The dust would get into the carburetor and into the engine and then wear them out.

M.N.: Was that fairly common?

Smith: Very common, all makes of automobiles. As a result, the dealers would have to get into it and repair them.

M.N.: Did it cause other kinds of damage to the cars?

Smith: Not other than mechanical damage, no.

M.N.: I mean did it ruin the finish on the cars?

Smith: Not too much, no. The dust that blew was not a sand like you get out on the desert. This was dirt not sand--sand will cut but dirt will get into everything but it doesn't cut.

M.N.: You mean it was like silt?

Smith: Yeah, more like silt and when it got into an engine, of course, it mixed with the oil, why, it was abrasive. It would wear out the piston rings.

M.N.: How did people pay for new engines?

Smith: The best they could.

M.N.: Well, when you look back on those times now, how do you regard them?

Smith: I don't know whether I can answer that or not. At that time we thought things were tough. They were hard and quite a bit of the time we were living from hand to mouth. You ate well, ate good you dressed fairly well but you didn't have much money left over. Now it's a different proposition. People can get anything they want nowadays if they want it bad enough and while we complain about prices being high people are paid a heck of a lot more money now than they were then and you can get along a lot better if you're a good manager.

M.N.: Did people have hope in the future in those days?

Smith: Oh yes, oh yes.

M.N.: Even when things were at their worst?

Smith: Well yeah, sure. It was just one of those things that heppened. Now, after World War I we had a depression and while it wasn't as bad as this one they still had one and prices went down but things came back and people figured that in the other depression things would get better, things will be better--that's human nature. As

I said, things did get better but it took World War II to bring us out of the dang thing.

M.N.: I just can't imagine someone that's been farming their whole life and then suddenly they lose their farm. It must have been devastating.

Smith: I guess it was, yeah, to a lot of them. Lots of them lost farms that had been in their families for generations.

M.N.: I just wonder how a strong man would cope with that kind of loss. It must affect a man to lose.

Smith: Well, a lot of them went to town and got jobs, worked at different things, different skills. It wasn't a skill to be a mechanical genius or anything like that so they had to take what jobs they could. A lot of them worked in grain elevators and worked for the government on jobs, city government, things like that. One fellow that's a friend of mine that lives out here now, he went to work as a janitor in a school. That's about all he was qualified for but he made a good living at it and retired.

M.N.: So people just more or less did whatever they had to do to get by?

Smith: Yes, yes. They'd do the same thing today. You do what you have to do to get by.

END OF INTERVIEW

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