

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION

From the Memoirs of Earl R. Desilet
and Wanda E. Haworth Desilet
Former Lewiston Valley Residents

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My father, **Earl R. Desilet**, was born in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho in 1921. He later moved with his family first to Spokane and then to Lewiston, where he attended St. Stanislaus Elementary School and graduated in 1939 from Lewiston High School.

His parents, Irene and Albert J. Desilet, were the children of French Canadian immigrants. Albert and Irene met and were married in Cloquet, Minnesota. A little over a year after they were married, the Great Fire of 1918 swept through Cloquet, driving residents from their homes. Along with so many others, they lost their home and all their belongings. Albert and Irene joined other family members and moved farther west to find work in the timber industry. Eventually, my grandparents moved to Lewiston, where my grandfather took a job as a sawyer at the Potlatch mill. They were not strangers to loss, unemployment, and hardship.

My mother, **Wanda E. Haworth Desilet**, was born on her parents' wheat ranch outside of Clarkston in 1924. Her parents lost their farm in 1932 during the Great Depression and moved into Clarkston. She graduated from Clarkston High School in 1941.

Her parents, Ruth and Leonard E. Haworth, were the grandchildren of homesteaders who established successful wheat ranches in outside of Clarkston. My mother's ancestors endured the hardships of traveling west and settling homestead properties. In spite of all my grandfather's efforts, seven years of drought ruined his credit and the local bank took over his ranch—the ranch he inherited from his father, who had originally homesteaded the property. Her parents did not let this terrible loss destroy their lives. They moved into Clarkston and began again. The house where they moved to on 6th and Highland was rented to them free in exchange for my grandfather's carpentry work.

In the 1930s, Lewiston and Clarkston were small towns. While in high school, my parents knew of

each other. Only after my father's return from his military service at the end of World War II, however, did they become well-acquainted. They were married in 1947.

Throughout my life, my parents loved to tell me stories of their years growing up in the Lewiston-Clarkston Valley during the Great Depression. My parents often told me not to feel sorry for the poverty of their childhood. First, they were too young to understand the economic hardship facing their parents. Second, they were lucky to escape the deepest poverty so many other families suffered. My parents also wanted to share an important lesson about human nature they later came to appreciate from their youthful experiences. When people were seriously challenged and needed help, they turned first to their families and their neighbors. They remembered their parents also largely trusted their federal government to help them. And it did.

The following excerpts from my father's memoir illustrate best his appreciation for the fortitude of his family and the kindnesses of neighbors he and his family were fortunate enough to enjoy.

In 1928 Dad had taken a job in Lewiston, Idaho with Potlatch. At that time, it was the largest white pine mill in the world, and Dad was to be one of its five setters. He had gone down from Spokane to Lewiston before the opening to help with the final construction. We joined him at the end of the school term in early June.

In 1931 when I was ten years old and still attending St. Stanislaus Elementary School, the family moved to 718 9th Street in Lewiston.



*7th and 8th grade students
at St. Stanislaus School.*

The Depression was upon us, but most youngsters were oblivious to this fact. Dad was still working; but later when the mill shut down, it put Dad out of work. The house had three-bedrooms and one bathroom. It was a small house, but adequate for our needs and our pocketbook. The rent was \$25.00 per month. It was on an alley, and across the alley lived the Norbergs. Mr. Norberg owned and operated the Lewiston Grocery on Main Street. Our

friend, Jack McNichols, delivered our groceries in one of the few remaining horse and buggies.

Behind our house and facing on 8th Avenue lived Rose and Otto Rimmelspacher. Otto's mother, Grandma Rimmelspacher, as we called her, lived with them. She was in her eighties, talked in broken English with a splash of German, and still spun yarn from her foot-pedaled spinning wheel. We watched her by the hour during the long hot Lewiston summers... We did not have a telephone. We could not afford one. We used Rose and Otto Rimmelspacher's telephone in a pinch. Communication with our relatives in Spokane was done by letter.

Next to them lived the Schnabel family with three children, Jim, Francis, and Phil. Mr. Schnabel delivered and picked up laundry for the C.O.D. Laundry. Good people surrounded us. Whenever we left the house to go to the store or town, we left it completely open. Locking doors at that time was not necessary.

During the Depression, many things happened that seemed to strengthen family life. Not only ours, but all families. When Dad was laid off work and could not pay the rent, the landlord, Mr. Zieman from



Pomeroy, told us to continue to live in the house and pay when we could. We were, of course, grateful.

Twelve year old Earl with parents in Potlatch garden

The Potlatch Forests Corporation donated a

plot of land at the mill, where mill employees planted vegetables. The whole family took part in weeding, watering and cultivating our portion of the garden.....The Rimmelspachers, with no children of their own, also were always helping our family in whatever way they could. They went to Lewiston Orchards or Clarkston Heights to bring home boxes of fruit. They seemed to delight in sharing with us...

Each Christmas Mr. Norberg made up a large box of fresh fruit, fruit cake, and nuts and had Jack McNichols drop it off on his deliveries. This was one of our greatest Christmas joys. We could have never gone out and purchased this sort of extravagance.

Through the Depression, we got by quite well through the help of our neighbors and our vegetable garden. Although it was tough going through the Depression, we children were happy as long as we were fed, sheltered, and loved. We had it all.

In my mother's memoir, she recalled her own mother's resourcefulness and generosity throughout the Great Depression.

On the Snake River the Grasser family operated a fish camp. They netted salmon from the river and held them in huge wooden crates filled with water. You picked the one you wanted to buy for seven cents a pound, and sometimes Mama canned the salmon. We kept a few chickens while on 6th and Highland, so had plenty of eggs. The Concord grapes from vines on our property we sold, keeping some to can for juice. On special occasions, we would make a wonderful punch by combining lemon, orange, and grape juice. The bakery sold day old bread a few cents cheaper. Pasta, rice, and beans were used to stretch the small amount of meat we were able to buy. By adding Mama's relishes, pickles, canned fruits and vegetables, the meals were never tiresome. We ate far better than most of my friends.

During this time there were many tramps roaming the country. Riding the rails from town to town, some were seriously looking for jobs, and others, unable to cope, had just deserted their families. They came begging for food at back doors. Later we heard they had secret ways of marking a house to let others know it was good for a meal. Mother would never turn anyone away. She always found something for them to eat. We still used the stoves from the ranch for heating and cooking, so sometimes they chopped wood for a meal.

My father remembered how his younger brother, LeRoy, led him and a neighbor friend to a job selling newspapers to help earn money for their families.

In 1931 my younger brother, LeRoy, was seven years old. That year the Mill shut down and put Dad out of work. Our income was nil. Mr. Rookey, a friend of the family and co-worker of Dad's, stopped by one afternoon to talk the situation over with Dad. LeRoy listened intently. He heard that money was scarce, and there did not seem to be a way out.

A few days later, as it was growing dark, Mother called us in to dinner. LeRoy was missing. After inquiring of the neighbors and combing the neighborhood, we were about to call the police. Then he came rushing in the front door. After we all finished asking where he had been, he explained that he heard Dad tell Mr. Rookey there was no more money. So he went out and got a job selling papers on the street and earned 35 cents. He held out his small dirty hand to show us the money. It was some time since any of us had seen 35 cents. LeRoy told me he got the job by asking the agent for the **Spokane Chronicle**, a Mrs. Bishop. He had first talked to the route carrier in our neighborhood who told him about the job. Then he assured me that she could use some more help.

The next day, Phil Schnabel and I went with LeRoy to talk with Mrs. Bishop, who decided to give us a chance. We started with ten papers each and soon worked up to twenty and twenty-five. There were soft spots to sell papers, such as restaurants, bus and train depots, and hotel lobbies. Headlines sold papers, and in 1932 when the Lindberg baby was kidnapped, we each took fifty papers.

By 1934, when I was 13 and in the seventh grade, things seemed to be getting better. Dad had gone back to work and Roosevelt was President. We were working our way out of the Depression.

My mother was in the fifth grade when Roosevelt was re-elected in 1936.

All that summer and fall the area was covered with posters of Roosevelt. Nailed to telephone poles, in store windows, his name was everywhere. This was my first experience with politics, and all the talk was about...Roosevelt, who was the man to solve our problems. It was an exciting event. We talked about the different political parties in our fifth-grade class, and even held our own election on the big day. Roosevelt won handily, as he did throughout the country.

As Roosevelt confronted the challenges of his office, American families continued to work to surmount the economic hardships they faced with renewed hope for the future. For example, in my mother's memoir, she makes a special note of the purchase of a radio.



Mother somehow found enough money to make a down payment on a radio. It was not only a radio it was a beautiful piece of furniture. The music and radio shows gave us wonderful entertainment. Dad loved the boxing fights with Max Baer, James

Braddock, and later, the immortal Joe Louis. We listened to music, plays, and comedy shows... There was also "One Man's Family" located and broadcast from San Francisco. I followed their lives for years. We also had the daytime dramas, now called soaps. We lived their lives of torment along with them, and I knew each theme song and time of day for all my favorites. It was very hard to work in necessary chores between shows.

My father remembered the growing economic improvements of 1936, as well.

Max and Buddy Baer passed through town, and we sold them papers. By then we were making two and three dollars a week and it was not long before we became newspaper route carriers.

For this we needed a bike...Dad saw an ad in the paper for a used one and we got it for seven dollars. It had a slightly high frame, and I could just barely make the pedals go around. It was good enough for starters. About this time, balloon-tired bikes came out and sold for thirty-five dollars with a bucket seat and wide handle bars. I had to have one. Since I was earning about twenty dollars a month on my route, it was affordable. I sold the used bike for five dollars, put another five with it, and bought the new bike. Dad backed my credit, and I soon had the bike free and clear, paying off the balance in stiff five-dollar-a-month installments.

Interestingly, my mother had her own Max and Buddy Baer story. She was 12 years old at the time. My first experience in watching a reaction of the general public to celebrities was in the mid-thirties. It was a summer I worked at Jane's Cleaners, where Mother was employed, picking up and returning alterations for three men's shops.

Max and Buddy Baer were professional boxers. Max won the World Heavyweight Championship in 1934. Dad loved boxing, so we heard a radio broadcast of

the fight when he won the title. Lewiston was agog with news Max and his brother, Buddy, also a world champion contender, were touring the United States and would come through Idaho.

One day [August 29, 1936], while waiting inside the shop for a “gofer” errand, I heard a commotion on Main Street and walked out to see a huge crowd gathering on the sidewalk across the street. In the middle stood a man a head taller than anyone else. I recognized him from Movie News Reels. It was Buddy Baer with Max beside him. The crowd, yelling and cheering, had stopped traffic plus all business, as Lewiston was having a field day. I had expected them to perhaps appear at one of the theaters, so it was huge surprise to see these famous boxers laughing and talking with the crowd as they strolled toward the Lewis and Clark Hotel.

My father loved Lewiston’s hot summer weather and being outside.

I remember the long, hot summers especially. They seemed to last indefinitely. There was so much going on in our children’s world. Phil Schnabel, Bob McNichols, Bud and Blue Stenstrom, Ade VanDyke, and Bill and John Hanson: we were all doing something together most of the time throughout the summer. We built scooters to ride, using an old pair of roller skates, a two-by-four, an apple box, and an old broomstick for handles. The big thing was rubber guns. We organized neighborhood wars and used parks, vacant lots, or an old burned-out house for the field of battle. We made our own guns, and they were works of art.

The Hanson brothers excelled in this and established how rubber guns should be made. Their pistols and rifles were not only good-looking, but fitted our hands and were comfortable weapons to use. Ammunition was obtained from service stations. We utilized their cast-off inner tubes, which were all rubber. We cut them in half-inch widths and then tied the strip in a knot to give it greater carry and stability. We had three or four wars a day. I had Dad bring home some white pine lumber scraps from the mill, which LeRoy and I fashioned into envious weapons.

Both of my parents loved to swim and fondly remembered their childhood summers spent swimming in the Snake River. Below is my father’s

memory of when he first learned to swim and the first time he swam across the Snake River.

Lewiston was hot in the summer, and it was common for the temperature to soar above one-hundred degrees for several days. Lewiston and Clarkston had swimming beaches across from each other on the Snake River, and we sought refuge there from the heat. I remember the day I learned to swim. Another friend, Francis Harlow, and I decided to tread water and paddled out to the anchored raft. It was not far out and we both made it. From the raft, we paddled up stream in the mild current. When we became winded, we treaded water allowing the current to carry us back to the raft. Soon we were taking actual swimming strokes in water over our heads and gaining confidence. We became addicted to the water. We were at the beach from dawn to dusk. We had contests to see who could swim farthest under water, and who wasn’t afraid to dive off the sixteen-foot tower. We teamed up and swam the river to the Clarkston side.

Our friend, Jimmy Evans, and wife, Bernie, were in charge of the Lewiston beach. Jim was a beautiful swimmer and a good instructor.

My mother, too, had the opportunity to meet Jimmy Evans, the Lewiston beach lifeguard, although not as a swimming instructor. She was about eleven years old.

In a moment of bravado, Jean LaLonde, her younger brother, a friend named Lola, and I decided to swim the river to the Lewiston beach. They were directly across, but the current was too fast to swim a direct route. The best way was to walk up the beach to an area where a rocky point turned the current away from our side of the river and sent it directly toward the Lewiston sandy shore. If you swam out to the main current, it was only a short hard battle to buck that current and be carried to the Lewiston shore.

We were all much too small to be attempting such a feat, but once it was suggested, no one wanted to back down. We talked about it for about an hour, and then started out. I walked to the point where we were to go into the water and decided I would not try it. They all started swimming, and with a taunt of “chicken,” I followed, now several yards behind. It was easy to reach the main current of the river, and its fast pace quickly moved you toward the Lewiston side. However, now the hard part was to fight the current, swim through it to reach the calmer waters

near shore. I fought with everything I had, but as I watched the others reach the Lewiston diving board and safety, I was still being carried downstream.

...Now I understood the reason for prayer. I pleaded desperately for the strength to pull me through this powerful current. With God on my side, I hoped to make the last log of the life line at the far end of the beach. My prayers answered I staggered up the beach. We were instantly upbraided by the Lewiston lifeguard, Jimmy Evans. He scolded us and said to rest for a while that he would row us back in his boat...However, we were told the return trip was much easier. We only had to go back up the beach, swim out to the current, and let it carry us right to Clarkston's diving board...We waited until Jimmy was busy, and started up the beach. As soon as we entered the water he saw us and yelled to come back. He got in the boat and rowed after us, demanding that we get in, so he could take us back...We swam on. He followed us all the way just to be sure we were safe...We were the talk of the beach for the rest of the day. No one believed such scrawny kids could accomplish the swim.

My parents enjoyed dancing and taught my brother and me how to “swing” when we became interested in school dances. They also shared favorite memories of their early dance “careers.” My mother noted her enthusiasm for school plays and dance programs.



Harold Ahrendt, my sixth grade teacher, was a very accomplished tap dancer. He decided to make up a dance troupe and chose me as one of the seven. We worked

after school learning steps he taught us. The high school soon had a program that he thought was a good opportunity to show us off, and our mothers made black satin pants and white blouses for a costume. We did our best and loved the response we received. I was determined to become a great dancer just like Ginger Rogers.

In contrast, in the ninth grade, dad reluctantly went to his first formal high school dance. *At the time, I did not care for dancing. However, all my friends were going and helped me find a date. Mother and my sister, Maxine, could hardly contain themselves. They cornered dad and insisted I was to*

be dressed properly. Of course, dad had no recourse. We went off to J.C. Penney's.

Having never worn dress shoes before, I was uncertain about how they should fit. The salesman was not much help. I settled for what I thought was a comfortable shoe. Dad would not let me leave the store unless I consented to wear a hat. He said you were never properly dressed unless you wore a hat. I did not argue because we would probably still be there settling the matter. Anyway, I was ready for the occasion. I did not know the first thing about dancing, but Maxine said it was easy. She rolled back the carpet at home and proceeded to teach me. It did not come easy, but at least I learned enough to get by.

Later, my father came to enjoy dancing. My parents like many young married couples after WWII, went to dances and listened to the music of the “big bands.” Mother and Dad attended dances at the Lewiston Elks Club on Main Street and drove with friends to Spokane for dances at the Davenport Hotel.

My parents were fortunate. They remembered their Depression childhood years with some measure of happiness and security. Although they needed to help earn money for their families, they also enjoyed play time with neighborhood and school friends. They were loved. They were fed. Kind and understanding landlords forgave their families' rent until they found employment again.

Their parents were strong and persevered. Their resilience and resourcefulness modeled for my parents a confidence and optimism for the future that my parents carried with them into adulthood. And, as we know, my parents' generation came out of the Great Depression to fight and win World War II. Whenever my parents were faced with their own generational challenges, like the Korean War and the Cuban Missile Crisis, they still displayed confidence and optimism for the future. Now they both are gone, and I miss them every day. I hope to maintain that confidence in the face our own current national crises. If the basic goodness and confidence of Americans like my parents lives on in their children and grandchildren, America will remain strong for future generations.