

Mr. Jack Rowe
Interview 020a
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Becky Bailey, Interviewer
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Abstract: In an interview with Becky Bailey, Jack Rowe recalls life in Amarillo and Dumas, Texas during the Great Depression. Mr. Rowe's family lived in the Texas panhandle and Arkansas while he was growing up, and remembers the hard times as a teenager and as a young married man. He recalls soup lines, CCC camps, dust storms, and low wages.

Becky Bailey (hereafter BB): I am interviewing Mr. Jack Rowe, at his home on 518 Westchester. Today's date is January 4, 1983. My name is Becky Bailey. Mr. Rowe, where were you born?

Jack Rowe (hereafter JR): Fort Worth, Texas.

BB: Oh, in the big city. When, what year?

JR: 1913, in October.

BB: What were your parents' names?

JR: William and Hatty.

BB: And did you have brothers and sisters?

JR: I had two brothers and one sister.

BB: Where your grandparents from? Were they from out of state or what?

JR: One was from Missouri, and one from Ohio.

BB: What type of education did you have?

JR: High school.

BB: Just through high school. Now that was through the eleventh grade or the twelfth?

JR: Eleventh.

BB: What type of work were you doing when you got out of high school?

JR: When I got out of high school, the first year I worked at a golf course, near Amarillo, Texas, maintaining the course.

BB: What type of pay and hours did you work? That sort of thing.

JR: The best pay I got was seven dollars a week, seven days a week, ten to eleven hours a day.

BB: That's a lot! You were young. You could do it. From the golf course then, what type of work did you do?

JR: Well, of course, during the winter that was out. So the next regular job I got at all was working in a small vegetable, ice, milk stand, kind of a forerunner to our U-tote-em type stores. The principle things we sold were ice, milk, and bread. And it was all curbside service.

BB: Did you work about the same sort of hours and pay? That sort of thing.

JR: I worked there from twelve to sixteen hours a day, seven days a week.

BB: Do you remember the pay you got for that?

JR: Anywhere from five to ten dollars a week. According to how the business...if business was good I got ten, medium, I got seven. If business was poor, I got five.

BB: Was this in the same Amarillo area?

JR: Yes, that was in Amarillo.

BB: Well, by 1929-30 what were you doing?

JR: I was still in high school.

BB: Oh, you were still in high school at that time. When did you graduate then?

JR: In '31.

BB: Were these jobs that you got, were they real hard to find?

JR: They were very hard to find. In fact, at the time I was working at this little drive-in grocery they were men with families begging for that job. Believe or not for five to ten dollars a week.

BB: Why did you quit those?

JR: Well, business got so bad in winter they just couldn't even afford that.

BB: What did you do after this?

JR: After that I went to Saul Springs. I went to Arkansas, and worked in the berry harvest, fruit harvest.

BB: Migrant worker, sort of thing. Just field work.

JR: Just by day to day. Whatever you could find to do.

BB: How did you get to Arkansas?

JR: My parents went to visit my aunt and uncle over there. And then they later moved over there.

BB: Were things any better in Arkansas than they had been in Texas?

JR: Well, not really. Other than like I say, the daily work you could find occasionally. I worked hard all summer and didn't spend any money and I left there then that fall with nine dollars.

BB: You worked all summer for nine dollars?

JR: That's what it amounted to.

BB: Well, what year did you join the CCC.'s?

JR: 1934.

BB: Just right when it was first started. Why did you? Could you just not find anything else?

JR: I could not find anything else whatsoever. There was nothing, even at that time if you could find a job, that was very steady. You might could find a day or two's work. But even at that, it didn't pay as much as that thirty dollars a month with room and board, which you could get in the CCC's. But actually I had worked, during that summer, at probably a half a dozen different jobs, for a day or two at a time. So I went into the CCC.

BB: Whereabouts did you join up?

JR: In Amarillo.

BB: Did they advertise it a lot? How did you find out about it?

JR: Well, it was in the papers. I don't recall it being really advertised a lot. Of course, I don't recall all the relief programs that were advertised. But of course, this was fifty years

ago. They weren't emphasized like the programs of today even. But it was available in the newspapers and so forth.

BB: And so you just heard about it and decided it was a good thing to try it? Okay, what type of training did you go through?

JR: There was no training. We just went to work.

BB: Well, where did you go to work?

JR: In the Santa Fe National Forest. Northwest of Santa Fe, New Mexico.

BB: Okay, so you joined up in Amarillo. How did you get to this camp?

JR: Well, they had people joining up in Amarillo from all the way down south as the Austin area. When I was...they would stick us in groups and say you're going here, you're going there and so forth. Ended up on a train, we went to Albuquerque, New Mexico. And all these people from Austin and all that area met us in Albuquerque. They loaded us up on trucks and took us to the forest. They didn't take anyone where they said they were going to take them.

BB: Sounds like the army doesn't it?

JR: The army was handling the transportation. And actually, the army operated the camps. They were in charge of the camps. They were actually working for the Forestry service. Five days a week we worked for the Forest Service. Saturday and Sunday, we were back under the army. Saturday morning we cut wood, and policed the camp, just whatever the army wanted us to do.

BB: Was this a regular army camp that you were at?

JR: No, it was a CCC camp, but it was set up like an army type barracks. There were four barracks that each took care of fifty men.

BB: 200 men in that camp. What type of projects did you do there in Santa Fe?

JR: We built Forest Service roads making it more accessible. These were just narrow, dirt roads that the Forest Service used mostly at that time. We had a second project, there was a little river. The second project was to build dams along this river. To bank pools so the fish could live.

BB: Was this a National Forest?

JR: Santa Fe National Forest.

BB: Okay, so it was all government land to start with. How were the roads built? Did you have any bulldozers or that sort of thing?

JR: We had some equipment, but it was nothing like they use today. We had a couple of bulldozers and one rake. The rest used a pick and shovel, dynamite. Hand work.

BB: One way to keep two hundred men busy.

JR: I've heard of a lot of CCC camps where they said they didn't work. They just fooled around. But we worked, and we worked hard. Of course, the Forest Service people we worked for, saw to that. There was one day that we started out toward Santa Fe, it was cold and snowing. It snowed six months out of the whole time I was there. One day was so cold and snowing the Forest Service, we started to work, and it got so bad that we turned around and came back to camp. So, the army immediately ordered us out of the barracks and had us start cutting wood. So that made the Forest Service mad, so they said, "If you're going to work, you can work for us." So they loaded us back up and we went to work. That was one of the mornings they suggested that we not work. A lot of mornings we would start out and it would be fifteen below zero. Snow everywhere.

BB: You said you worked five days a week for the Forest Service. What were your hours? What time did you go out and what time did you come in?

JR: We got up at 6:00, had to make our beds and shave and everything. We ate breakfast at 7:00, went to work at 8:00, and we worked until dark. Most of the time we came home in the dark. It was probably nine hours a day work.

BB: What...Did they carry your lunch out for you?

JR: Some days when you drove, you came in for lunch. But if you were working far out,...later, I got on the survey crew and we had to carry our lunch. We never came in. If you were working close enough they came for lunch, too far out they had to carry it.

BB: Did they have a regular mess tent?

JR: We had a mess hall. Just like the army.

BB: Okay, the two days a week that you were there,...ok, you worked Saturday for the army. Just policing and repairing and chopping wood. How many army personnel were there to over see the camp?

JR: Well, I think usually there were about three was all. One man, a Lieutenant, actually ran the camp. And of course, they had supervising officers. I think they had one general who was over every CCC Camp in New Mexico. But the local camp actually had a Lieutenant who ran the camp, and a doctor, and an officer, I have forgotten his rank. Part of the time they would send a school teacher around who was on the army payroll. But I don't recall anyone ever going to school.

BB: What about Sundays?

JR: Sundays we were on our own.

BB: Could you go into town?

JR: We were sixty-five miles from town. And we had no transportation. The only time I left the camp in six months, was a week off Christmas. We usually just roamed around the mountains.

BB: What type of pay did you get for all this?

JR: We got thirty dollars a month. We got five dollars and twenty-five dollars had to go to our parents. We never saw but five dollars a month.

BB: But you had no place to spend it.

JR: Of course, we had a little canteen there where you could buy candy and few little things like that.

BB: Was your father working at this time?

JR: During most of the Depression, he worked. Like a lot of people in hard times. During most of the Depression, he was in charge of the asphalt plant for the city of Amarillo for paving purposes. So they couldn't even operate their maintenance crews continually. So they would have to be laid off.

BB: So the twenty-five dollars really came in handy?

JR: No, they saved it for me. However, during this time they certainly could have used it. Because it finally got so bad that they had to move to Arkansas to live. You could live cheaper in Arkansas. And at one time he was living off his Spanish-American war pension which was forty dollars a month and then they cut it to fifteen. Of course, by this time he was well up in his fifties and he was crippled, he only had one arm. But during this they saved the twenty-five dollars I sent home. And it was there for me when I got out.

BB: How long...Ok, you said you were at this camp for six months, is that just as long as you were in the camp?

JR: That was the enlistment period, six months.

BB: Could you re-up if you wanted to?

JR: I'm trying to think. I really don't think you could serve some more. I think you had to get out at the end of the six months. I couldn't swear to that.

BB: When did you get out then, 1935?

JR: Spring, 1935.

BB: What type of work were you able to get then?

JR: During the summer of 1935, again it was odd jobs. I was working for my brother-in-law at a service station; he wasn't my brother-in-law then, while he was taking a vacation. And a friend of mine from high school came by. Back in the past my brother-in-law had worked for the state highway department. And I assumed that he had...which I hadn't met,....and I knew a couple of his brothers slightly. But he had been promoted to district supervisor of the highway department at Dumas, Texas. And this friend of mine that I had in high school came by and you might put this, this was during the best part of the day. His family had a dairy and he wanted me to help him haul tumble weed for cow feed. So I worked with him after my brother-in-law got back for a week or two hauling tumble weed. During this time, this Mr. Moore with the highway department, the area district was in bad shape so he was able to hire a few extra men. So this friend of mine that contacted him. Then he called me, so I rushed madly out to see and we both got a job with the state highway department at Dumas, at that time, this was in August I guess, of '35. He loaded the crew up close to thirty people. And uh, after about three or four months we got the area in pretty good shape I guess, and they cut it down to six people. And fortunately I was one of the six.

BB: So that was really your first steady employment.

JR: First really you could call steady employment. I went to work for thirty cents an hour. And I worked eight hours a day, six days a week.

BB: Well, did things start seeming to become easier all over at this time or just for you?

JR: Just for me. Times were still very, very tough. Very, very hard to get a job. However things did begin to break slightly, but very slightly before World War II.

BB: Like in '38-'39, in that area?

JR: There was a little better, but not much. It was a little better in my area because the oil and gas exploration and production had started. Nationwide it probably wasn't any better until World War II started, were there any jobs available.

BB: Ok, at this...well, you couldn't vote for Hoover at this time, you weren't old enough. Did your parents, had they voted for him?

JR: Of course, they were very against Hoover and all that. But in retrospect it wasn't any more Hoover's fault than anyone else's.

BB: But at the time they...

JR: They were very bitter against Hoover.

BB: Did they expect him to do something or did they think he couldn't do anything?

JR: They thought he caused it.

BB: Well, what were their feelings about Roosevelt, then?

JR: Well, they thought Roosevelt was great. Of course, it was the war when things started getting better. They like to blame Hoover but they praised Roosevelt. Actually neither one were personally responsible for it one way or the other.

BB: Mr. Rowe, were you familiar with any of the WPA Projects?

JR: Not directly, no. By observation.

BB: Were there some around Amarillo?

JR: Yes.

BB: What type work did they do?

JR: Mostly just make work, clean up, a little paving work. They were well over-staffed. They had too many men for what they had done. Mostly make work.

BB: Were these older men or were they...

JR: They were older men, yes. Middle aged, of course, there were some young men. But as I remember they were older men.

BB: I meant to ask you about the CCC. Was this strictly for younger men or was there age limits and that sort of thing?

JR: There was age limits. I don't know what it was, but it was for younger men.

BB: What about a man that had a family could he join?

JR: No, it was strictly for single, young men.

BB: When you were living in Arkansas or Amarillo, either one, did you ever garden or try to raise livestock on the side?

JR: We gardened when I was in Arkansas, yes. That was all.

BB: What about any hunting? Did people try to supplement their income?

JR: Especially in Arkansas, yes. There's a little something to hunt over there. Squirrels, and so forth. Now in Amarillo, there wasn't anything to hunt.

BB: Was food or clothing ever in just really short supply as far as your family was concerned?

JR: Now in the Depression we never did starve, but we had been like I say, raised on beans and potatoes.

BB: Just didn't have much variety?

JR: No variety. There was little shortage of food to buy. We just didn't have the money to buy. I just want to put in my own personal opinion. We have all these government programs now and so forth, they say well how did you live back then? I say well we helped each other when nobody had anything. But even so I do not remember anyone starving to death. Everybody helped each other. If you had a little extra we shared.

BB: Was there organized relief in Amarillo? I assume it was a fairly large city by that time.

JR: Nothing compared to what they have today. They had a little welfare department. And that was about it. At that, relief like we know it now was just non-existent.

BB: Did the churches help?

JR: The churches helped tremendously. The church groups helped.

BB: Like soup lines and that sort of thing. Did they have those in Amarillo, too?

JR: Yes.

BB: When social security came along then after a while did people...or like your parents and all, did they like it? Did you like it because you would be paying in at that time?

JR: Yes, I started the first. I was one of the first on social security. I was never too sold on it, I'm still not, because look at the condition it is in right now.

BB: Do you think a Depression, like '29, can happen again?

JR: Yes.

BB: Any other opinion?

JR: Yes, it can. Well, our government's broke now isn't it? They're treating them so good now that they say, "Well, the government will take [care] of us now." They didn't then but I can see that they're able to now. What are we going to do with social security? No one has an answer yet what they're gonna do even next year. So, yes it could happen in my opinion.

BB: Do you think people, say that are like in my age bracket would react as you did at that point?

JR: Not nearly as quickly I'll say that. People your age, most of them at least, does not think it could happen. They just can't conceive it. I could tell you some stories that you wouldn't believe at all. Or at least my kids don't, they laugh at me and think I'm lying or exaggerating. Ya'll just can't realize how it can happen over night. Especially in Amarillo, the oil and gas there was a boom going on. Until one day, wham! And then everything stopped.

BB: Just over night! Well, over here it was kind of a creeping thing. It didn't happen over night.

JR: It seemed like over night from good to bad.

BB: When did the oil and gas start picking up then, in that area?

JR: In the late '30's.

BB: How did you get into the C.C.C.?

JR: It was run by, well, I don't remember what they called them, but you go down and you apply and there were thousands of people wanted a job. And it wasn't like walking up and just signing up. You went down there and talked to someone, they took your history, and they debated and this went on for months. Everyday I was down there and got one of my wife's old friends, we got to kind of buddying down there. He was a little younger than I was and then some boy from Greenville, Oklahoma, was up there trying to get in. For some reason they were going up that way to get to Amarillo. We got to where we ran together, and we got to where we wouldn't go home at night. When they quit talking to us. This went on for a month, we stayed there late every night. This man that was running the place, he would get mad and fuss and we would finally leave. So when they finally started signing them up, it took them three days to pick the first nine or ten people. So Friday night there he wouldn't go home so we sat there. And he raved and he cussed and he said he couldn't take us because we weren't on welfare, and our parents weren't on welfare. We kept telling them, well we didn't think we would be on welfare. So finally at 7:30 that night, he got mad and signed the three of us up. That's the only way we got in. There were thousands of people trying to get in, and I think they took fifty people that first time from Amarillo.

BB: And just turned that many others away. I didn't realize that. I thought they pretty well took care of them. Well, perseverance paid off. They decided they needed you on the crew.

JR: They needed me out of the office, is what they needed.

BB: When did you meet Mrs. Rowe?

JR: During my childhood, my parents and Jean's parents were friends. We have really known each other, I think that I can remember the day she was born. But anyway, since I was working and so forth during '34 and '35 her parents let me stay there. Furnished me a bed and food. Most of the time if I was working I paid them a little. So, during that time we started going together a little bit. So when I went to work for the highway department in '35 we decided we wanted to get married. It got to the point, I went down and took my physical one night, and all I had was a twenty dollar bill. He gave me a little physical and he didn't charge me because he knew I didn't have any money. And the doc, he asked me when I was going to get my marriage license; he knew I worked six days a week. I said, "I guess, whenever I can get in here early enough, you mean now?" I said, "Well, you can't do it now!" and he said, "Sure you can." So he picked up the phone and called the county clerk and told him he had a man there who wanted to get a marriage license and works six days a week, and can you make it down. And so he did!

I went down there, of course, at night, they have everything locked up, and so for my twenty dollar bill, he gave me my marriage license. And he couldn't change my twenty dollar bill without unlocking the safe, which he didn't want to do, so he said, "You can just pay me later." So after we were married she took what was left of the twenty dollar bill, after I paid the preacher two dollars, and went down and paid for our marriage license. And that's what we started out with.

BB: So you started out on less than eighteen dollars. Where did ya'll live?

JR: In Dumas. We moved into a little old run down motel. And I mean it was just shacks. At that time there were a little over four hundred people living in Dumas. Now, it's about fifteen thousand. There was four hundred some odd people lived there, and we lived in an old run down motel for quite a while. Then we got rich and rented some converted barn apartments, and decided to live there for a while.

BB: What kind of rent did you have to pay?

JR: (Question to wife) Do you remember at all what we paid? Very little. After we lived in this barn apartment for a while, we moved into a little two room house. I know we paid six dollars a month.

BB: And this was in '35, '36 along in there? Mr. Rowe, do you know any stories about the dust storms that took place in Amarillo at that time?

JR: Yes, I can tell you a lot of them. They were worse after we were married and living in Dumas. When I was working for the highway department, and I didn't keep this record but some of the boys at the service station kept a record. And during March, 1936 the Courthouse was just diagonally across the street, a four-story building. And twenty-seven out of the thirty-one days in the month they could not see the Courthouse, ever. During that time the highway department was taking down a fence, a barbed wire fence. Because these fences caused tumble weeds and things and the dirt would build up over the fence and that would hold and cover up the road. So we had to take down this right of way fence between Stratford, Texas and Texoma, Oklahoma. Twenty some odd miles of it. We had to dig it out. And during that period of time, that took us at least a month. While we were eating lunch, between twelve and one, we were parked inside the right of way fence between the highway and the railway, because you couldn't see anybody on the road. Then while we were eating lunch every day there was a train went by. And I would say we were not more than fifty feet away, and not one time could we tell whether it was a freight or a passenger train. The dust was so thick. You would see a blur, and hear the train.

BB: Were dust storms common up there anyway? Or was this just...

JR: A dust storm is common but, nothing like to that extent, maybe two or three a year. And high winds a lot without the dust. The dust like that was six to eight years was terribly bad.

BB: Did it wipe out a lot of the cattle and sheep?

JR: Oh yes, the families couldn't farm any more. A lot of barns were completely covered up. Windmills, maybe just the fans would be sticking up. Just like the fence, things start catching and dirt just builds up around it. Grounds be blown hard. Oh yes, that is where they got the term "Okies", leaving Oklahoma because they couldn't farm. The same way in the Texas panhandle and Kansas.

BB: Did banks fail in this area during that time?

JR: Most of the banks failed in that area, yes.

BB: Was it mainly from...?

JR: Just a lack of money. No money circulating. The farmers couldn't pay.

BB: The farmers had loans out and then they just couldn't pay?

JR: People buying homes couldn't pay. They didn't have a job because there just wasn't anything. Just striving to live and they couldn't pay for homes.

BB: Well, what would happen to these homes that were repossessed and then the banks failed?

JR: A lot of them were sold for nearly nothing later. One friend of ours had a little home. I think, a couple of times. It was a nice little house, I think it cost him about two thousand dollars. He had about a two thousand dollar loan. I think he owed about seventeen hundred dollars, approximately. And they repossessed it and he had to move and several months later they called him and let him have it back for about half what he owed on it. To get rid of it. I mean they couldn't sell it. He bought it back for just a few hundred dollars.

END OF INTERVIEW