

Mrs. Beulah Beidleman
Interview 003a
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Becky Bailey, Interviewer
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Abstract: Diboll Assistant Librarian Beulah Beidleman tells interviewer Becky Bailey about life during the Depression in Crowell, Texas and New London, Texas. She recalls the hard times, the way her family made ends meet, and the relief when she and her husband found steady jobs. The New London oil fields provided both hard times and work and she remembers the New London School explosion as well. She and her husband did not receive any poor relief during the Depression, but they did benefit from a small business loan.

Becky Bailey (hereafter BB): I am interviewing Mrs. Beulah Beidleman at the Public Library in Diboll, Texas. Her address is 828 Nelson and today's date is November 9, 1982. My name is Becky Bailey.
Mrs. B. Where were you born?

Mrs. Beulah Beidleman (hereafter MBB): In Sayre, Oklahoma.

(Mix up on the tape)

BB: When were you born?

MBB: February 6, 1904.

BB: When did your family move to Texas?

MBB: In 1918.

BB: Do you have brothers and sisters?

MBB: Yes, I have two sisters and one brother.

BB: Do they live around here?

MBB: No, one sister lives in Lawton, Oklahoma. One in Capitan, New Mexico and my brother lives in Clyde, Texas.

BB: You are scattered all over, then. What type of work are you now engaged in?

MBB: Assistant Librarian in Diboll.

BB: Where did you live when the Depression started?

MBB: In Crowell, Texas.

BB: Whereabouts is that?

MBB: Crowell is in, I suppose, Central Texas. It is west of Vernon, Texas, and close to the Oklahoma border.

BB: What type of work were you doing there?

MBB: I was employed at the Bank of Crowell.

BB: Were you married then?

MBB: Yes.

BB: When did you marry?

MBB: In 1922.

BB: So you had been married awhile by this time, and you were working there. What kind of hours did you have at the bank?

MBB: Well, from 9 till 4, I believe were our hours then. We stayed until 4 o'clock.

BB: Do you remember what kind of pay you were receiving at this time?

MBB: Well, I don't exactly remember. Seems like about \$250 per month. I really don't remember. But it wasn't very much then. But money would buy quite a bit.

BB: Did you have fringe benefits such as sick days or this sort of thing?

MBB: No. No.

BB: Did you work six days a week?

MBB: Five, just five days.

BB: Just five days even at that time. What kind of housing did you and your husband live in?

MBB: We owned our home. It was a three bedroom house. We had....it was fairly new when we bought it. We had owned it, I think...we bought it in 1927 or 1928, something like that.

BB: Just a year or two before. When did you notice that the bank was starting to have problems?

MBB: Well it seemed to me that it started in probably the late part of '28. Money began to get tight and at that time, this was an unincorporated bank. And we received our money, operation money daily, and it would come in. It was mailed to us and it was picked up at the Post Office. The money began to get a little scarce. Sometimes they would not get as much as they asked for, that sort of thing. So they noticed that money began to get scarce.

BB: Even at that time, when the stock market crashed in 1929. Did it really...?

MBB: Well, yes and no. In a small town like that you didn't feel it like you did in a larger place. But, of course, money did get tighter. For quite some time the President of the bank would worry because he would say, "Well, we just don't have enough money to operate on." Because of course, their loans were pretty heavy and they needed so much current cash to keep operating. Some mornings he would say, "I don't see how we are going to open today." Two of his sons worked in the bank and one was very optimistic and one was pessimistic. One would say, "Well, Dad, I think you are right, we just can't make it today." The other would say, "Nope, we are going to open today." And he would open the doors and we would stay open another day. And that went on for several weeks.

BB: Were there any runs on the bank?

MBB: No, not really, that we noticed.

BB: When did the bank close?

MBB: I don't know the exact date of the closing because I had left the bank by that time. I was pregnant and I had worked until I was about five months pregnant and then I quit. So I left the bank before my baby came and before the bank closed. But it wasn't very long after I quit before the bank did close which was in the latter part of ...19...Well, it might have been 1930. Because it struggled along there for a good while. Because my baby was born in 1931. So it was....

BB: Along about the same time?

MBB: Yes, about that same time.

BB: What type of work was your husband doing prior to the Depression in 1929?

MBB: He, at that time, had an oil agency, owned an oil agency and sold gasoline and also a filling station. But prior to that he had been the manager of a business in a little town out from Crowell. It was a mercantile store. He managed it and I kept the books when our first baby came. This was my second child that I was pregnant with at that time.

BB: What kind of hours and pay did he make? Of course, he was independent so...?

MBB: Well, six days a week, from early till late, because he didn't have a helper. Not more than one at a time. It began to get pretty rough and he couldn't employ anyone like he had. I would send his lunch down to him so he could stay there all day. I would fix his lunch and let my little girl take it down to her Daddy.

BB: For all day, when did things really start really getting bad in his business?

MBB: Well, in 1930 it began to really get bad. He had to let it go or close out. Probably that was 1931 because it wasn't too long before we had to let our house go. We sold our car too, to try to save our home. Finally, it all went.

BB: Were there many of your friends that were losing their homes, too, at this time?

MBB: Yes, there were quite a few.

BB: What kind of a community was Crowell? What was its economic base?

MBB: Ranching and farming. Lots of cattle country and a lot of wheat grown there. It was more or less, wheat and ranch country, more than cotton.

BB: Did the prices fall in wheat like they did in cotton?

MBB: Yes, they did.

BB: Well, since you were both unemployed at this time, what did you do after you lost your house?

MBB: Well, when it got to where we couldn't buy groceries anymore, we moved out with my father-in-law. He had a farm and a farm house out in the country. We moved out there and raised a garden and we had our own cows, milk and butter, and with a little bit of extra work that my husband could get here and there. Probably picking cotton in the fall or just anything he could get to do, he did it. There just wasn't any money in circulation. No one had any money.

BB: Was there a lot of bartering?

MBB: Well, not to my knowledge, really, everyone had a garden and grew everything they could, and canned fruits. We had our own hogs and killed our meat. What vegetables could be raised, we raised them.

BB: Did you just do without when it came to clothing?

MBB: Just about right, yes, we surely did.

BB: Let's see, this was '32. What was the general feeling about Hoover at this time?

MBB: Well, nobody liked him. I'll tell you. Of course, they blamed Hoover with it, which altogether wasn't his fault. But he was certainly not a popular man.

BB: Then the election started around '32 when everything got really bad. How did they feel about Roosevelt?

MBB: Oh, they worshipped him practically. When he came on the radio and would say, encourage us and say that things would get better. He was going to start the WPA program and the different programs. CCC Camps and things like that, that put people to work. They just thought that he was wonderful and he was. He gave us hope. That was the thing about it. People were so distressed and down with no money, week in and week out, month in and month out, until we were ready for anything.

BB: I can't imagine what it would be like. You had two small children.

MBB: I couldn't either. I think back now and think how we endured it. I don't know. Many a tear was shed in wondering what to do. My husband was just desperate because he couldn't furnish us anything. Of course, a little bit of money would go a long way, shoes, fifty cents for shoes. The stores were closing and they would take anything they could get if anybody had any money. It was that way over that part of the country because there were no monthly salaries except from businesses. There was no industry out in that part of the country. It was strictly farming and ranching.

BB: When did you decide to move?

MBB: In 1932. My two brothers and my father had lived in Electra, Texas. They had worked in the oil fields around Electra and they had heard of the activity in East Texas. They came down and were working. My brother had a tent that he and his wife and two children lived in. He was working in the oil field. My father had come down later and so they knew our circumstances. My father came out to Crowell in his model-T Ford. And brought our family with what bedding we could bring and what few clothes to East Texas. And we landed there. We didn't have any place to live.

BB: This was in New London?

MBB: It was called Reed Switch. It is a little place out from New London. We stayed there with my brother until we could find something to live in. We found a little house on the highway between Overton and Kilgore. We moved in the back of that and set up an ice dock. My father and my husband set up an ice dock. All of the rigs were using ice at that time. They would deliver ice out to the rigs and collect for it and come back and probably make three trips into town or four a day to buy more ice. Because they didn't have enough money to buy a full load they had to buy what they could, sell it out, and then my mother and I operated this ice dock on the highway, which we helped out and lived in the back there. It was pretty rough but we did eat.

BB: So it was a whole family operation.

MBB: Two families. Right!

BB: You lived with your brother in his tent?

MBB: No. Yes, until we found that. That's right.

BB: Was your husband eligible to work on the WPA or any of those other projects?

MBB: Well, he never tried. I don't know whether he was eligible or not. He never tried. He had ... you know, your pride was hurt because, to think...I remember hearing him say one time after we had lost the car. He was hitchhiking from Crowell, where we lived, to my home in Electra where I was and where my mother was. He was hitchhiking and this fellow came by and ... he had been trying to hitch a ride and quite a few had passed him up and he finally got there. His feet were so tired and he said "As many times as I have driven a new car up and down that road and had money in my pocket and to think that I'm down to this."

BB: That would hurt your pride, wouldn't it?

MBB: It really would.

BB: I wanted you to describe New London for me. What it was like with all the people coming in. Were they able to find work?

MBB: Not all of them, no, and there was no place to live. People were living all over that area, camping out. They were living out of their cars. They slept out at night. I had a friend, a very good friend, who had been superintendent of an oil company in Oklahoma City. And he and his wife and two children had been out of work for a long time and they came down to the East Texas field. They had cots that they were sleeping on. They didn't even have a cover, a tent. Mind you, he had had a house full of furniture, and cars and everything. He had...in fact, he moved his furniture to his sister's in Crowell and left it there. He and his wife and two children came down to East Texas to find work, and they were living out on these cots and they had managed. Well, he had two daughters and one of them was sick. He didn't have any money to buy any medicine or any fruit or anything. He went to a grocery store and took about a half a dozen oranges and told the man, he said, "I'm taking these oranges. My child needs them and I don't have any money." So he just walked out with them. The man didn't do anything. After he found a few days work, they bought some groceries and they were cooking on a camp stove. Their groceries were stolen one night out from under their cot. So...people were desperate for everything. There were just thousands of people down there without work and they were doing everything they could. They had to eat.

BB: Was there any organized relief as far as..?

MBB: Not to my knowledge in that part of the country. I really don't know. The oil field was just starting up and practically everybody was in the same shape. But after Humble and Gulf and a few of the larger companies moved in there and built a camp and offices, and then things began to get better. But it was awfully hard to go to work for them because there were hundreds, just hundreds of men for every job.

BB: I need to think how I want to say this. Did your husband ever go to work for Humble or any of these...?

MBB: Not for Humble. He tried but he didn't get on. But he did go to work for a contractor. He was a welding contractor and he would lay gathering systems for the refineries. He was pretty good size. He had about six machines. My husband went to work for him as his superintendent. He did the hiring and the firing and I went to work in the office. I kept books for the same company.

BB: What year was that?

MBB: That was in 1934. I believe, '34 or '35.

BB: So you operated the ice...?

MBB: We didn't operate that very long. After we...the men went to work we didn't operate the ice dock any longer.

BB: I see, but that was still a couple of years that you did that.

MBB: It surely was.

BB: I see, when did thing, well, things started getting easier for your family then, I guess in '34.

MBB: Yes, in '34 or '35 after my husband went to work. Then we bought a little three room house and moved into it, away from my parents. They built a house there after they got able to buy the lumber why they did put up a house. And we lived with them awhile. And then when we got a little better off why we bought us a place. They were all just shacks, you might say, but we were proud of them.

BB: I imagine after sleeping in a tent.

MBB: Right, right.

BB: It was good, when did things start to become normal around the oil field there? I mean as far as, you know, a town starting to...

MBB: Well, it began to get much better in '35 and '36. New London had put in some businesses, restaurants and cleaning shops and different grocery stores, different things, and they paved the street or hard surfaced the street and then quite a few people began to move in with Humble, in the Humble camp; and it was a lovely camp there. Those that could live up there did, but quite a few worked for different companies that did not live in the main camp. And it began to look much better by 1935 and '36.

BB: Do you remember what you were getting paid then when you went back to work in '34? You or your husband?

MBB: Seems like he got \$150 a month. And he got two or three raises. And it seems to me that I was getting around a hundred working in this office.

BB: So you still weren't anywhere close to what you had been making.

MBB: Oh no, no. But money would buy a lot. You could buy a loaf of bread for eight cents.

BB: Could it buy more at that time than in 1929?

MBB: Yes, uh-huh, well, not more but still a little bit of money. See, milk sold for fifteen cents a half gallon and bread for eight cents a loaf so you could make a dollar go a long way. You could buy a meal for a dollar.

BB: I see, but it still took you a long time to get back to the standard of living that you were used too.

MBB: Oh yes, it certainly did.

BB: When would you say that happened?

MBB: Well, I wouldn't say that happened until probably 1940, '42 or something like that. Because we had...in 1937 when the London School exploded it just demolished the entire building. They began right away to build it back. And we realized that we needed to get ... (into something) the field would come and go. It would be high at times and then work would get scarce. So we had two children you see, and we decided that if we could put in a business of some kind and we could operate that and it would be permanent or be steady, so we decided that we would put in a little restaurant across from the New London School because they needed it. There was only one little eating place over there and she only sold hamburgers and hot dogs and that sort of thing. So I didn't know a thing in the world about operating a restaurant and neither did my husband. We decided that if we could put one in, it would pay off, and justify us and make a living. So we went to the bank in Crowell (Overton). We had talked it over and we went to the bank in...Overton, I'm sorry. And I knew the banker there. I had worked on the Memorial Committee after the London School explosion and I had gotten acquainted with the business men of Overton, some them and the banker. I thought well, maybe we could go

there and borrow the money to put in a little restaurant. The day we went there, there was a wreath on the door and he had just died. So that really deflated me, anyway, we decided then...we were still considering it if we could just go somewhere. So we went to the bank in Arp and told them what we wanted to do. We had heard of this, the loan, the government was making loans then.

BB: Small business loans?

MBB: Yes, to go into business. But we didn't own any property, we didn't own any land. We owned our house on a lease...leased lot. But we didn't own any land. Well, the rules were, the banker told us, that if you owned the land, they would make a loan for you to put up a building. But we didn't own any land but he also told us that we might be able to get a repair loan. They were making repair loans which were quite a bit smaller but...he said, "Do you have any building that you can repair? And call it a repair loan?" So we said, "Well, no we didn't." but after we got home, we were still talking, so we said why couldn't we tear down the house that we were living in and use that lumber to build the restaurant. And we went back and talked to him about it. He said, "I think it would work all right." So we moved in with my mother again, and tore down the house that we were living in and used the lumber in that to build the restaurant. And we only got, as far as I remember, seems like it was a five hundred dollar loan that they gave us.

BB: To build a whole restaurant?

MBB: To build a restaurant and buy equipment. But when you are desperate, you will do a lot of things. You give it a try, my husband wasn't as optimistic as I was. He would sometimes say, "We can't do this." I said, "Oh, yes, we can." We did. So we used friends and relatives and anyone else we could to work. And paid as little as we could, then we had to buy equipment. I didn't know a thing in the world about what you would need to open up a restaurant and neither did my husband. But we had a friend who had been a cook in a restaurant, and he had agreed to go with us to Ft. Worth to purchase our equipment. Dishes, stoves, everything that you were going to need. We built our cabinets and as far as I remember, we built our tables, I think we picked up our chairs wherever we could. We went to Ft. Worth, borrowed a truck, went to Ft. Worth to a second-hand restaurant equipment place and bought enough to open up that restaurant and I believe we paid seventy-five dollars down on it and owed the rest of it. We owed everybody that we could owe, because we got it wherever we could. But anyway we got back and opened up the restaurant, and the first morning I never was as nervous in my life. I wouldn't have been as afraid to go before the President of the United States as I was for that first customer that came in. I had never served a cup of coffee or anything. Anyway, we hired our help and we opened up for business, and there was a great demand for food because the people were working on the school building over there and we had a good business from the time we opened up. But we didn't have any money to operate on and it takes money to buy groceries so we would take...many a time the donut man would come about five o'clock in the morning or five thirty, leave our donuts, we wouldn't have money to pay him, but we would have our breakfast run. And pick up enough money to pay him for the donuts when he came back by. People had never gone through anything

like that though don't know what you can do when you have to. A lot of mornings we didn't have as much as a dollar change to go in our cash register. But we would...quite a few times my husband would say, "We just can't do this. We just can't keep operating." I said, "Yes, we can. Yes, we can." And we did. And after a while...well, the teachers, after they finished the building, the school building, and there were about fifty teachers over in that building. Well, they all knew us and they ate with us. But they didn't get their money...pay...but once a month and they would charge their food for thirty days until they got money to pay us. But we had to have their business, so we established credit with a couple of grocery wholesale houses and a meat house. So we would operate on credit for a month until they would pay us and then we would pay them.

BB: Rob Peter to pay Paul, all the way down the line. I was going to ask you how big a restaurant was it? How many tables did you have?

MBB: We had a counter and, I think, we could seat about thirty. But we would sell lots of hamburgers. We would make hamburgers up from eleven o'clock. We would start making hamburgers, and get them made up because when school was out, they didn't have a cafeteria over at the school at that time, they would, probably twenty-five or thirty at the time would come over and we would sell hamburgers. And our business was really good from the time we opened up. I made the pies. I never could find anybody to make pies to suit me and I would open up every morning. I was open at five and then my husband would come down a little later because he would always close. After the cook would come on in the morning, I would start making my pies and I would make about fifteen or twenty pies every morning. I would usually have them made by eight o'clock. But our pies were noted all over East Texas.

BB: That sounds like a lot of hard work.

MBB: It was, but it didn't hurt us. We were younger then. I couldn't do it now, but I did it then.

BB: How many people did you employ besides a cook?

MBB: Well, we had about four usually about four girls on a shift, about eight, four for the morning and four for the afternoon. We were open from five o'clock until eleven at night.

BB: What did you pay these girls?

MBB: I believe it was, well most of them or some of them had brothers and sisters in school and they would take part of their pay in food. So much food and then we would pay them so much cash. I really don't remember, but it wasn't very much.

BB: No, it couldn't be.

MBB: But not long ago. I went back to the reunion of the London School and one of the girls that used to work for us. She said, “Mrs. B, don’t you remember when I used to work there and I took part of my pay in food for my brother and sisters that were in school?” I said, “Yes, I remember.”

BB: Do you think a Depression such as 1929 could happen again?

MBB: Well, I wouldn’t say that, it would be as bad as it was, I really don’t know because the government is operated in a different way now. But I really wouldn’t say, wouldn’t predict. I would sure hate to see it because there would be more suicides in this one because the people couldn’t take it like we did. We had always been used to hard work and we hadn’t been used to the affluent living that today’s young people have.

BB: When you say that the government is operated in a different way, what do you mean by that?

MBB: Well, they have...for one thing they have made studies of different styles of living now that we didn’t have then. It would be bad, but I don’t believe it would be as bad as it was then. I really couldn’t go into detail and tell you, but that is just my thinking just what I feel.

BB: Right. Was there a lot...a different attitude about relief now than then? Do you see that?

MBB: Well, (Then) people hadn’t had relief, they have had such affluent living now, you know, the social security was Roosevelt originated or started that in 1936. And that has been the greatest thing for senior citizens which we are reaping the benefits now. But my husband and I started paying social security when it first came out and have paid it all these years. That is one thing, you know, used to senior citizens or our fathers and mothers had to move in with the kids when it got where they couldn’t work and take care of themselves. But now then we live differently and they don’t have room for them. So many times it takes the mother and the father both to work now. Two paychecks to live on and they don’t have any room or any time for their parents. And if it wasn’t for social security and the nursing homes, I don’t know what people would do. Really, it is not because you don’t want to, but it is impossible.

BB: Right.

(The dialogue ends here)

END OF INTERVIEW