Ogren Interview

TM: March 9, 1973. This is Timothy Madigan talking with Byron and Irene Ogren of rural route 2, south of Moorhead. This is being recorded for the Northwest Minnesota Historical Center. First of all, Byron, what is your background? Were you born in Moorhead and attended school here?

BO: I was born in Moorhead here right on the farm where I live and I attended school what was known as Sunnyside School which is about a mile south of my home east of where I live here for the first eight years. Later I went two years to Moorhead State College High School.

TM: Irene?

IO: I was born at Sabin, Minnesota and I attended school there for eight years and then I went on to Moorhead High School where I graduated in 1935.

TM: How about some of your parents background? Byron, first of all, when you knew, when did your parents first come over and from what country did they come?

BO: My father came from Sweden in about 1903 and my mother was born in Moorhead. Her parents were Mr. and Mrs. Ole Lundin and her mother died when she was about a year old and she was adopted by P.J. Lundins who lived on the farm I live on.

TM: Did your dad ever go into the reasons for him immigrating from Sweden to the United States?

BO: Lots of people were coming over and he knew people who had come to Moorhead so he came here more or less because they were here and he lived with them in town awhile and got a job working for Landins out here on this farm where he met my mother and they were later married and they went then
to Floyd, Montana where they took a claim, government claim of a quarter of land and started farming at that time.

TM: You mentioned that when your parents moved to Montana to homestead that they lived in a sod house

BO: Well the way they did it, they all went up and they homesteaded their quarter and they built a house of sod to start breaking the land and raising the cattle and they lived in that for four or five years until they were able to build something a little better.

TM: I take it for granted then that your parents did move back here to Moorhead

BO: About in 1918. My mother's folks who lived here wanted them to come back so they bought adjoining land and came back and started farming on the farm next to this one I am living on. And, they worked together then my grandparents and parents.

TM: Irene, do you know when your parents first came over?

IO: My parents immigrated from Norway in 1904 and they came to Hillsboro, North Dakota where my father had an uncle living at that time and he worked on a farm for some time and they later moved to Clay County Minnesota and he began work on the railroad as a section hand and that was his life's work until he passed away. And I graduated from high school and I was offered a job at a dry cleaning plant where I worked until I was married in 1938.

TM: How did you and Byron meet in the first place?

BO: Well, my brother lived next door to us and I met her through them.

TM: What's kind of interesting. You two eloped didn't you to South Dakota?

BO: Either that or you can say the times were so tough in those times you couldn't have a wedding. So the cheapest way was to go to Sisseton.
South Dakota where we got married and then we came back from there. Even then we didn't have money enough to set up a home. I think it was four months before we told anybody about it and by that time I had a job and she was working so we were able to set up a home.

TM: What year was this?

IO: 1938. (laughter)

TM: Ah, you must have been perhaps in your early teens or probably 10 or 11 about the time of the depression of 1929. I wonder if you can if you have any impressions of how your family reacted in that early period of the depression.

BO: Well I remember the morning the banks went broke. A neighbor called my father to tell him and the day before my father had went to town. He had just received a beet check for that year and had deposited that and everything from his cream route, he had a cream route that he delivered eggs around Fargo-Moorhead and everything had been put in the bank the day before so he was practically penniless that morning and of course when the banks close up you got nothing. It took 6 or 7 months before any part of the money was released. At the same time my brother was in the hospital and it was a pretty sad state of affairs that day NOT knowing how you were going to meet the payments and so forth.

TM: How old were you at this time?

BO: I would have been 10 years old.

TM: Yes, well how was it that your father was able to make it through?

BO: Well business places knew it happened to them the same as it had happened to him or anybody that had money in the banks that did go broke and they went along with it until they were able to get money to pay their bills and then just exactly how long later whether it was a year or so I don't remember for sure when the banks released about half of the money that was lost after it had gone into receivership so they were able to get
started again.

TM: I was wondering Irene, how the depression affected your family, in the early part of the depression.

IO: Well, I, really just how it affected our family I know my dad worked for very low wages on a railroad and ah we always had a big garden and ah, we always had chickens and possibly ah, raised our own pork so we were able to get along on through the lean years so to speak but then I think of the years later when he only worked part time on the railroad and when the WPA projects came into being and that's when I really remember the lean years.

TM: Well did your dad work for WPA?

IO: Well, yes he did. Because in the winter he was layed off in the railroad and then he was hired to go out on WPA projects and work and at the same time we were given an allowance of food, canned meat and as I recall perhaps some flour and so forth and ah you were ah they were very lean winters as I recall them.

TM: Ah, what about other members of your family?

IO: Well, I had a brother who was in the CC camps and as I recall that was up in northern Minnesota where he went up and got a check and that was sent, part of it at least, was sent home and part of that was banked for him. It was very meager by all means.

TM: The CC now that's Conservative Corps?

IO: Yes. Civilians Conservative Corps.

TM: When did you yourself first start to run the farm here

BO: Well, in the duststorm it didn't rain it was dry and duststorms very great during the dearly 30's and as a result of these duststorms ah, my father got sick and ah, what should have become a mastoid operation caused blood poison which he died from in 1931 as there wasn't anything you could do
for it in those days like today you use penicillin and it really was nothing to do; he died as a result. I then was forced due to these dry years and poor prices which had been. I was forced to quit school which was the end of my schooling and start working the farm. Our livelihood depended on cattle and most of the farm was put into feed and hay for the cattle and we continued with this cream route where we sold eggs and turkey and chickens and potatoes and what else on the route to Fargo-Moorhead and to support my mother and when my father died I had twin brothers that were just a year and a half and a younger brother and I.

TM: So when you took over the farm the economic base of the farm was the livestock

BO: It was, There wasn't any money. Nobody had any money in those days, it was just to sell what you could and try to keep something to eat which even was hard at times.

TM: What kind of crops did you have then?

BO: Well, we raised alfalfa hay for the cattle and oats and barley for feed and some wheat but at the same time this dry time was going on and poor prices there was no new seeds raised. We didn't have fertilizer in those days so it was common to have a crop hit by rust because the seeds were that you planted weren't like today's ah and as a result you had, well you should have had 60 pound wheat you had wheat down as low as 42 pounds. Which ah, we at once sold at a cent a pound at 42¢ a bushel although they took 60 pounds to make a bushel. What should have weighed 60 really only weighed 42 so it took about a bushel and a third to make a bushel in those days. So there really was no income much from the crops which was the same for everybody else.
TM: Well, perhaps now we can get back to, ah, your impressions of Franklin Roosevelt and the way that he handled the Depression and especially how he handled the agricultural situation.

BO: Well, as everybody knows, there was programs where hogs and cattle were killed and you were paid, I don't remember the exact amount $10 for a cow or $1 for a hog or something to ah do away with surplus animals and at the same time ah have more feed for those that you kept and you were paid which doesn't sound much today but helped in those days to keep going. This is part of Roosevelt's program to start with and ah...which eventually lead to support some prices which were very low but ah which made some hope for farming although the better times as far as farming didn't really start until about in the early 40's when it had gone far enough so it had started to take some effect and then of course the war came on which ah...

TM: Would you say that Roosevelt did the right thing as far as the farmers and agriculture went that he was following the best policies or ...

BO: Well, it was the only thing because in the earlier years ahead of this, farmers were all loosing their farms and there was laws put in. Langer of North Dakota had alot to do with it ah, put a law through so that they wouldn't take the farms away. They were allowed to stay on them. Many farmers in certain areas were paid to take their fences and turn them upside down and just anything to keep some work with some pay where they would stay on the farm and sometimes got to where it was worthwhile for the country to have them there.

TM: Now did you ever before this time ah, have people around, farmers around the area here that you knew that had their farms up for auction or had you ever been to farm auctions at this time for foreclosure.
BO: Oh, I was to many of them. Many farmers lost their farms. Many farmers who did lose them under these new laws were allowed to ah buy them back with little downpayment, I mean with no downpayment and so much of their crop to hang on to. There also were foreclosures on farm personal property by banks that they had borrowed from that now had to foreclose them. They were called sure sales and very unpopular but most they tried to buy back what they could and most things didn't sell very high because farmers would more or less stick together and not bid against the farmer that was forced out and he would buy back for fraction what he owned.

TM: Was there any kind of organized effort to keep the bidding low at auctions in this area?

BO: It was just the respect between each other knowing that this farmer on no fault of his own was being forced out. They wouldn't bid against him and he would put a low bid in and nobody would bid against him so he would buy it back. Very reasonable but ah, even then he didn't have that kind of money so somebody would, they would help each other. It was different in those days. Everybody more or less helped each and nobody was even concerned whether they got paid for it or if a farmer got sick or something they went over and helped cut up his hay or cut up his crops and it was just part of the way of life. Everybody was for each other.

TM: It's kind of a paternal attitude. Helping.

BO: Helping each other. And they had organizations they call farmers clubs or something of that order where they had get togethers and served lunch and that was their form of entertainment with very little cost.

TM: What, what was the social life like at this time?

BO: Well, it would be involved just like I say around the farmers club or visiting with your neighbor which everybody did alot of visiting with
their neighbor where they would have coffee or play cards or just discuss the times and that was about it. When I was young I don't remember going to a show for once or twice a year which was very reasonable to go to because we just couldn't afford it and it was mostly right in the neighborhood in the country.

TM: Irene, what was your role on the farm when you started living here in the late 30's and 40's?

IO: Well, my...life on the farm would be the life of every other farm wife was to the everyday of cooking and helping with what chores I could. We had chickens for instance, then and there was always the garden to be taken care of which I did and ah then one of my duties when my husband was busy in the spring and the fall I had to do the school bus driving which he did for 15 years.

TM: What school district was this? Was it the Moorhead school district?

BO: Well, it was District 79 which is the district we live in but the children were transported to Moorhead State College grade and high school.

IO: It would have been just the everyday ah chores that any other farm housewife had to do I was responsible for and when we were harvesting there were the extra work of feeding and cooking for the farm hands.

BO: The first about 12 years that we were married we drove the school bus the the first 15 and then I worked out wherever I could get extra work all the time, but in this the first 12 years we had to haul our own water everyting was ah...just about as far back as you can believe I mean we first started with all the water was hauled all those 13 years that we used but before we got so we could drill a well at the place we're at an,... to make it easier the lights came then in about 1941 we got the lights otherwise we had kerosene lamps to start with it was ah...
TM: This is from the REA program?

BO: The REA that was part of the Roosevelt programs and I think that's probably the thing that advanced farming further than almost anything besides the use of fertilizer and ah conservation programs that for ditching and university college programs were developing new seeds which started to make it better later.

TM: I was wondering about the farm organizations, ah right now you're a member of the Farmers Union?

BO: I'm a member of the Farmers Union. I was one of the first in this area to start a Farm Bureau and help organize the merchants. They jointed at that time into the Farm Bureau. And they started the first blue cross ah which is hospital care in this area. I helped organize this part of it and ah........

TM: Approximately what time is ........

BO: It must have been the early 40's. I can't quite remember exactly, and ah later I jointed the Farmers Union

TM: Are you a member of both organizations?

BO: No, I'm just a member of the Farmer's Union. I've been a life long member of that

TM: Why did you get involved with the Farm Bureau as opposed to the Farmers Union. What advantages did you see in the one organization over the other.

BO: Well I was...The farm bureau was starting in here and someone starting it off wanted me to help with going to merchants and trying to get them to belong so we could get something started, and it was through the Farm Bureau that we had we did this hospitalization plan and it was a very good organization to belong to I thought at the time and but in my opinion which is just mine, later on why I believe the farmers union did more to
lobby in Washington for prices and so forth better than the Farm Bureau so I later just turned to that.

TM: I see. I was wondering. In the area of politics once again, do you consider yourself a democrat now or DFLer?

BO: Well, my folks and grandparents and I'm sure my wife's parents too, they were all solid Republicans. In fact everyone was Republican. That is what it was. As I grew, started on my own, as far as I could see the Democrats were offering more to the farm program. Which I then was a Democrat for a number of years and worked in the Democrat party which I still do somewhat although I, like a lot of other people, I have come more to vote for the man today I would have to consider myself leaning a little more to the Independent

TM: In the 30's did you, before the Farmer Labor Party and the Democratic party merged, switched from Republican to the Farmer Labor Party or to the Democratic party?

BO: Well, I suppose it would have been to the Farmer Labor party, ah... which we which we switched first which later emerged and became the D.F.L....That's probably how I got more over to the Democratic party than any other reason.

TM: What was your impression of the Farmer Labor governors - Floyd B. Olson and Benson. Governor Benson.

BO: Well, I was quite young then but I think that was what the people would lead me to believe at that time one of the greatest things that happened. It worked more for Labor and the farmers. Ah, perhaps just to get back once again to the just of the everyday life in the 30's and 40's, what about the area of entertainment in your home like a radio. Did you, have a radio as you were growing up?
BO: Well, ya. I can remember when we first got a radio. Ah, it was a radio and a big horn for a speaker and it run with what you call A batteries and B batteries and then a wet battery which is like a car battery. And ah, the expense of it when there wasn't any money was great and they didn't last long these batteries, so most people would start them when fall came and you'd have them over winter until you went to work in the spring. That was about the length of the time you'd have a radio.

TM: It was mostly through the winter....

BO: Winter months when there was nothing else to do, I mean when you were all around the house all alone in those days everybody had a herd of cattle to milk and horses too that kept you busy part of the time outside and part of the time inside.

TM: The thirties was probably the high time for radio programming. Also for the number of speakers that they would bring on like Roosevelt and his fireside chats and perhaps also Father Caufman. I wonder if you ever listened to......

BO: Well, I listened to all of Roosevelt's speeches but they, that of course would be mostly in the 40's...early 40's. It was the late 30's of course, but I mean it was mostly in the 40's and although by the 40's we had ah early 40's we had REA so we were then having electric radios and we had them the year around of course which you, when you weren't doing anything else, you were listening to the radio. The radio went from morning until night as far as somebody in the house was concerned. So I heard all of Roosevelt's speeches. We waited for to hear them.

TM: Did you ever listen to like Father Caufman?

BO: No...

TM: Do you recall him at all?
IO: I can recall him. I know he was strictly for labor. And ah he I think he was from Detroit, Michigan. Am I wrong on that? But ah, or was he out of Washington, D.C.? And as I recall he was ah, did he lead some labor movement? And ah there were strikes as a result of this and caused legislation to be passed in favor of labor that is about my best reflection of him.

TM: What happened with the coming of the Second World War? How did that affect your family and which kinds of burdens or help did that bring?

BO: Well everybody was the same. I was farming I had at the time the war broke out the draft started before that. I, just before war I was one of the first assigned. They sign under 21. I was 21 August...The latter part of August and I think it was the first day of September the first draft was, was I already signed up for the draft ah it wasn't the draft until later but ah and then all through the war you would sit ah not knowing whether you would go ahead of approximately 150 or so hogs and ah 17 or 18 milk cattle and I was still driving school bus and you never knew when you were going you were given a physical and knew you had passed and that's where I would sit for month to month knowing they had to give me at that time about a month to do with my cattle and farming and so forth if I was called but ah it affected us that way. Not knowing what was, what you were doing. And as far as the farming there was ah well we used some Canadian equipment and I even once went to Canada to get parts for that equipment but it was impossible to get equipment here, infact in auction sales as you were talking about earlier if there was a tractor put their name in and the names were all put into a hat and one was drawn from the hat and that one got to buy the tractor and that's the way during the war all your equipment was sold. Your entire rationing, gas and food rationing and ah any meat
was with stamps and...ah to get tires you had to turn in tires first then if they had any extra and then when you needed it it was to go in and fill out forms to try to get them. And then you were deferred because of farming and then just about the end of the war they were ready to call but the war ended then so I never went. I had two brothers that went and Irene had what, 3 brothers? Ah, one of her brothers, she can tell about that.

IO: Yes, one of my brothers was shot down over Italy and was a POW for several, for about 13 months and I, my other two brothers saw service over seas in Europe and in Africa and but all three of them did return home.

TM: We can get into some of the changes that have come about in farming since you started, first started farming in the 30's, such things as an increase in the use of machines and so forth ah, and also the change in labor, farm labor or the hired hands that you would have to work in the harvests.

BO: Well, when I started farming everything was with horses and all the equipment was geared for horses. As far as men in those days you could I know we hired many men just for their board and room and very good salary for a man was approximately $10 a month and his board and room and then it went on and during the war years it was impossible to get help of course and then of course I got my first tractor, I think in about 1940. And those tractors were different. They were smaller, at a very reasonable price. I think the first one I bought new I paid a thousand dollars for it.

TM: Before this everything was horses?
BO: Everything was horses before. And the first tractor of course had a job of pulling two bottoms. Half the time the front end was off the ground the way they were made in those days they didn't pull right. And then I keep coming up with tractors. I think I had four Oliver tractors in a row and some Chalmers then in 1948 it was when the Moorhead beet plant was built and ah, ah I went into sugar beets and it was still hard to get equipment because ah, ah I got John Deere equipment then finally and from then on they couldn't have started advancing very rapidly where of course today we got tractors that have everything on them and cabs and ah well it's just unbelievable to go from where I started at horses to things which they are today. And of course this advance in equipment is came in seeds and fertilizers and everything else at the same time so it's just a complete different world.

TM: What ah, what changes did the building of the sugar beet plant here in Moorhead bring about on your farm?

BO: Well not only on mine but in every other farm in this area, every farm had cattle and ah, although I had been on the town board for 26 years and I saw the list I can't just exactly say how many cattle but there was the fact that every farm had cattle and there was large farms, there was a Concordia farm and a Fairmont farm and they had up to the hundreds of milk cattle so we run into many, many thousands of cattle in our township that I live in while today I doubt if you could find 7 or 9 head of cattle and they would be of course for beef or something else. I don't think there is a milk cow in the whole township. So the beets coming in changed the whole type of farming from a dairy area into a beet area and then with beets of course, on the rotation wheat and grain came in much stronger where in the early part of my farming 12 bushels was ah 12 to 20 was a large crop of wheat
per acre. Well in the last years I had had some pieces of wheat to make up to 72 bushels an acre and ah has come about because of the seeds, fertilizer and equipment. However everything else went into accordance men now I pay two and a half an hour working on the farm and I farm what used to be about 6 farms so the amount of land I farm, I farm it with my son and we do almost all the work ourselves which couldn't be done unless it was for the equipment being modernized like this.

TM: When you first started farming there was...you had to have much more help hired help...

BO: Well, the farm when I first started was about 160 acres and a few we had up to 300 acres and everybody had to have a lot of help because of course mostly done by the family they were a larger family and ah the grain was all cut with a binder, everything had to be shocked, everything was thrached, had to be hauled from the front of the wagons to the machines and then it was cattle so we needed the straw and all they hay was put up by hand there wasn't any balers in those early days. Ah so it was pritched on the wagons or into the barns or used what they call slings track in the barn that used to pull hay up with a team and ah everything was hand labor. It was all with your back ah and even like when I started it was all walking behind and everything drags to save horses and of course it was just a complete opposite or speed of today.

TM: In the early part of the summer you have migrant workers that hoe. Right?

BO: Well, we have Mexican labor that comes from Texas that helps thin and hoe the beets. We did back in those days too when my dad lived. That would be back in the 20's when he first started. The early 20's. I think he had ah approximately oh 30 acres of beets maybe less at times and maybe he had ah 4 or 5 workers all of the day we do parts of it and try to do
own aim is to do half of it with machine thinners and sprays that we control weeds with and ah of course during the harvest now we have to hire a truck driver and as far as the harvest of the grain, we do it with combines. Each one a combine, my son and I and we hire someone to haul the grain or to drive the truck to haul the grain and that's about as much help as we need at that time.

TM: How do you see the future of farming in this area, in the Red River Valley?

BO: Well, it is going into very large farms like when I go back to the early 30's when land was selling for when I first remember for 20 and 25 dollars an acre today it's 300 and up and with the amount of equipment, the price of the equipment and the amount of the equipment, it has to ah go larger which is already is up to. The farms are I suppose are 700 or above and I think the farms will get larger and there will get less farmers and ah everything on a larger scale. That's the only way you can operate with the expense of the equipment today.

TM: Thank you.