

ORAL HISTORY T-0367
INTERVIEW WITH JOHN BIEDENSTEIN
INTERVIEWED BY JOAN MARICLE
DEPRESSION ERA PROJECT
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MARICLE: Today is July 12, 1974 and this is Joan Maricle. As part of the Oral History Program at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, I have with me today Mr. John Biedenstein. We will be talking about the United States Depression. All right, will you please start, Mr. Biedenstein, by giving us some biographical information about yourself.

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, my name is John Biedenstein. I was born in the city of St. Louis in 1900, but now live in St. Louis County. I'm a veteran of WWI, serving in the Navy. I'm now married and have four children and about (can't understand).

MARICLE: Ok, Mr. Biedenstein, I think what we'll do is exactly what you said. We'll just start at the beginning. Now what was the beginning for you?

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, as far as I'm concerned the beginning was the break in the stock market was about the first of it. And then from then on, it just kept rolling on slowly. Oh, for three or four years, things got just a little worse all the time at finding a job or having a job. I don't know just how to go about getting a start on this thing.

MARICLE: Well, for instance, when the market crashed, were you working then?

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, yes.

MARICLE: Well, you were in the Navy in WWI. When you came out of the Navy...?

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, I had a filling station at the time of the crash and of course, it slipped and got off to a bad start and it kept on getting that way and I had to get out of there. And we tried every way we could to make a living.

MARICLE; What were some of the things you did?

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, I was a carpenter by trade at that time and I did pick up a little work here and there, but you didn't get a whole lot for it.

MARICLE: Was this in the early thirties, around 1930?

BIEDENSTEIN: Yes, in the thirties, the early thirties.

MARICLE: Now, Hoover was President then, right?

BIEDENSTEIN: That's right.

MARICLE: Do you feel that he did any ... do you recall any of the things that he might have done or how the people felt or how you felt?

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, no. Like most of you-republican presidents was a conservative and he tried to hold down things by conservative. The fact is I was on a government job, which didn't pay a whole lot, but after the election and he lost, it might have been before, they cut down on the employees; the government employees and I lost a job; not a big job,

MARICLE: That was under the Hoover administration?

BIEDENSTEIN: Yes, that was still under the Hoover administration. Well, after that I made a move ... the fact is I lost my home and I made a move to a small place with a couple of acres of ground, where I could do a little field work, raising (can't understand), round up the cows and (can't understand) every other thing to make a few dollars. And it worked out. I always managed to scratch out a living through most of it. But there were an awful lot of people who didn't. They had an awful time, anybody who didn't have anything but a little house and lot. As long as they were lucky enough to keep it, they were alright, but some of them were loosing them. And then after the election in '32, the country was taken off the gold standard; that's when everybody was out of a job, I believe, because we worked on projects after that we done with man power; we shoveled with wheel barrels and picks.

MARICLE: WPA?

BIEDENSTEIN: Yes. Of course the wages on that wasn't very much, but it didn't take a whole lot to live anyway.

MARICLE: Yes, what were prices ... you didn't have to make a whole lot of money in order to get by in other words?

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, to keep from starving to death.

MARICLE: Yes, there were no luxuries around?

BIEDENSTEIN: Not too much. Well, you could take the kids to the picture show maybe once a week for dish night, grocery night, prize night. They used to have all kinds of deals like that, they'd let the kids in for a dime I guess, or going up to a quarter maybe.

MARICLE: When you lost the house the first time and then you got the house with a little bit of land, did you have a job then?

BIEDENSTEIN: No, not a permanent job.

MARICLE: You just picked up things?

BIEDENSTEIN: We'd do whatever we could.

MARICLE: What were some of the kinds of things you were able to do?

BIEDENSTEIN: Oh, I worked on a farm, did carpenter work, everything under the sun for that matter; kept a half a dozen cows at one time and sold a little milk; kept a bunch of chickens and sold eggs. Those days were a lot different. You could make it for a little bit. You could do things in a small way.

MARICLE: And survive.

BIEDENSTEIN: And survive. yes, of course, it got so bad in the country on small farms that people just had to come to towns because they just couldn't even make it.

MARICLE: You felt it was easier in the cities, that a lot of the people were moving off their farms?

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, the WPA worked in stuff like that. They were more prevalent in the cities than it was in the country well into the Depression until they got it organized out there and then they had it too. But, I don't know, it's so hard to remember every thing that happened.

MARICLE: You were married then at that time?

BIEDENSTEIN: Oh, yes.

MARICLE: How many children did you have?

BIEDENSTEIN: Four.

MARICLE: What about a place like Hooverville? Do you remember anything about that?

BIEDENSTEIN: Not too much. It was down on the river and it was nothing but a bunch of shacks built over an old dump up in north St. Louis where they had been dumping and stuff they dumped, they built little shacks out on the levy. And, of course, like anything else, they got along the river because they got water; an abundance of water. But that was more salvage in them days; an awful lot of salvage.

MARICLE: What do you mean salvage?

BIEDENSTEIN: People would save old crates for fuel in the winter time, save papers, anything they could burn. Everybody in town or everybody around had a shed, a woodshed or something like that. And a lot of people cut wood and had wood stoves for heat so they would have to buy no coal. Gas heat, of course, was out of the question and electric heat and air conditioning, we never knew anything about. When it was 95 degrees, that's where you were at You couldn't go any place else.

MARICLE: When you worked for WPA what did you do? Was that a regular job?

BIEDENSTEIN; No, it was just three days a week and I think it paid about 45 cents an hour for about 24 hours a week. That was about what it was.

MARICLE: Did you just work on different projects?

BIEDENSTEIN: Most of it was on municipal projects; creeks and streets. Oh, there's a ditch that we still drive by over here that I guess a thousand men worked in there with pick on it and shovel and wheelbarrows. And you look at it today, you wonder how they ever got it done like that, but we got it done.

MARICLE: It's kind of like the pyramids?

BIEDENSTEIN: Yes, it looked like it was an everlasting job.

MARICLE: Do you think, then you look back on the Depression and things that you did, that there was something that could have been done that wasn't? OR at the time, did people complain or were they just too busy trying to stay alive?

BIEDENSTEIN: People didn't complain too much at all: They got along real good because everybody was considerate of the other guy. It isn't like it is today . When somebody needed help then you had all the help in the world because they didn't have nothing else to do. Nobody had a whole lot of money to spend. You had more social gatherings then than you do now. I mean church affairs and the like of that; family picnics and all of that. If you had a dollar, why you could really go out and have a ball.

MARICLE: Then you really feel that people were closer to each other?

BIEDENSTEIN: Oh, a lot closer.

MARICLE: Families kind of hung together and friends pitched in when somebody needed help?

BIEDENSTEIN: That's right.

MARICLE: I guess that's true- But there were some people, I imagine, that faired even worse as far as economics go and getting by. But you really feel that the fact that everyone was in the same boat, helped?

BIEDENSTEIN: Pretty much. Either that or those that didn't have jobs or weren't making a lot of money, they had a lot of people that they could come out and do what we done then. People were more anxious to work and get it done and they knew they were in trouble and they had been working hard. And they just went ahead and worked hard then. We run right into it, the end of the Depression. The fact is we more or less rolled out into it.

MARICLE: When Roosevelt ran in 1932, how did you feel about him?

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, my politics haven't changed. I did vote for him the second time and I voted for him the third time because we were in war and it was logical that we keep him there. We didn't want to change anybody at the helm in the middle of the day. But as far as politics is concerned, I don't think politicians are responsible for the times. The people are responsible for the times more than politicians. They might be on the steering committee, but if the people don't want to go the way they're steered, why that's the way it's going to come out.

MARICLE: Then if the Depression, you see, was kind of the fault of the people, it was up to them to get out of it, not the government's concern?

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, the government had to have them do a lot of things the people had to follow.

MARICLE: And you think they really did during the Depression?

BIEDENSTEIN: Yes. They had to follow then because it was apparently the only 'out'. Today they won't be lead.

MARICLE: Yes, well, that's true because they were in a position, they didn't have much choice then. You did feel that you had to do it or die?

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, it was about that.

MARICLE: When you had the little house the little garden and you raised vegetables, your own?

BIEDENSTEIN: Oh, yes.

MARICLE: Did you have a big enough place to be able to can things and keep them?

BEIDENSTEIN: We had to.

MARICLE: There was no buying them.

BIEDENSTEIN: We had nothing to buy them with.

MARICLE; Was that a very relevant idea, did a lot of people do that?

BIEDENSTEIN: I think an awful lot of people did that.

MARICLE: I mean even with small pieces of land? Well, you a city person, you were born in an urban area. And yet you figured out how to raise things and grow them. And other people were doing the same thing?

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, I inherited that from my home folks. They done it all time, of course, they were urban people too. But, oh there's so many instances ... I know I was downtown one day at the Farmer's Market, there was a fellow there with a whole pick-up load of cantaloupes and cucumbers. I think there was 14-16 bushels of them. He hailed me; he wanted to sell them to me for \$4.00. I said I only got 2. I walked by his truck after I had picked up what I wanted to, he said "You still got the \$2.00?" I bought the 14 bushels of stuff he had for \$2.00 and on the way home I sold \$2.00 worth out it. So what I had was all profit. But I got rid of about half of it, but those were the conditions people lived under. The same way with hogs at one time. We had so many damn little pigs, that they had to grind them up and throw them in the river. That's one thing a conservative would never agree on.

MARICLE: That's right, that's wasteful.

BIEDENSTEIN: It's wasteful, it's wrong to do that. And about the next year, we had an awful drought So I'm still a firm believer that you get what you do. That's the trouble with the way things went then. If everybody would have done things the way they should have, we might not have had such a Depression. Maybe it's a warning.

MARICLE: Like what? What were some of the things people did that kind of produced the condition that everyone ended up in? I mean what do you think they might have done differently to prevent it?

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, they could have made the distribution a lot better to begin with instead of waiting until it got so bad. And when these people started leaving these little farms they should have done a whole lot to try and hold them there because that kept them off the labor market, if they could stay out there.

MARICLE: And they all flocked to the cities and it just made the condition worse.

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, it got to a point there before the Depression that they couldn't make it on them because outside prices were too high. The stuff they had to buy cost too much for what they could produce on a small farm. And of course, a lot of them didn't own any farms, that was the worse of it. They tried to buy the farms after the war and the price was up. It's just the way the situation is now; land is real high. Land was real high in the early twenties after the war. People had bought this and had big mortgages on it and they couldn't make the (can't understand) and they had to leave it. There was only one place to go and that was to town and see what they could do; get on WPA or whatever was handed to them; welfare or whatever you want to call it. I personally didn't put too much time on WPA: just about, oh, less than a year. I don't feel (can't understand) that I even monkeyed with it. I was always able to get out and try to do a little something.

MARICLE: You preferred doing something on your own?

BIEDENSTEIN: Yes. People (?) were getting a lot of things for nothing. I put in a lot of fourteen or sixteen hours a day for \$3.00 a day. \$3.00 was something, though, let's put it that way.

MARICLE: Well, yes. When you think you got all your bushels of cantaloupes there and everything. That is true. That \$3.00 was a lot more then than it does now.

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, I know of another instance where we never (can't understand) milking a few cows and we bought 500 bushel of corn for 15(? a bushel. It cost us \$75.00 and we had an awful time raking up that \$75.00. We'd take it out to the mill and have it ground. The miller wouldn't let us take it off the truck until we paid him \$50.00 to grind it. He didn't want the corn and we didn't have the \$50.00 to pay for it; he wasn't going to grind it. And those were the conditions that you run into. We had to get out and hustle up the \$50.00.

MARICLE: How did you get the \$50.00?

BIEDENSTEIN: We had to go borrow it. It was the only way you could do.

MARICLE: From the bank or from friends?

BIEDENSTEIN: No, from friends. Somebody that had use for the corn if something went wrong.

MARICLE: Oh, they had an interest in the corn?

BIEDENSTEIN: They had an interest in the corn, if we couldn't make the (?). No, the banks wouldn't look at you for anything.

MARICLE: Well, the banks were in pretty bad shape, early in the Depression?

BIEDENSTEIN: Some of them were ... not so early in the Depression, but after Roosevelt got in there and he closed the banks for a couple of days. Of course, a lot of them had failed before that. I mean, they weren't insured like they are now. Of course, what that insurance would have been now, it would be something like that (can't understand) which it can't, because they're not going to let it.

MARICLE: So there wasn't much help from the banks, then? I mean you just kind of (can't understand) for your self? And find that people that ...

BIEDENSTEIN: ... would help you.

MARICLE: That had the same interests you did. What did you do with the corn then?

BIEDENSTEIN: Oh, we fed it. We had cattle eat it. We'd sell a little of it. We made enough to (can't understand) and sell it in the neighborhood ... get by.

MARICLE: Can you think of some of the other things people did particularly here in St. Louis or that you did yourself to get by as things progressed? After you got going with the cows and chickens and et cetera and started buying and selling and kind of living off of that, then where did you go after that? What was the first job other than WPA?

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, I done a little building on my own, a little contracting on my own.

MARICLE: When did you build the ... all the houses here that you have that you rent?

BIEDENSTEIN: Oh, mostly, those ... one of them was during the war, two of them before the war.

MARICLE: How did you get the materials? That was kind of at the tagged end of the Depression, wasn't it when you did that?

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, yes. It was at the tail end but it was that way when the FHA loan business come in. I had a job out here in the a subdivision, the fact is I run the subdivision for a real estate man. And that's where I salvaged a lot of this stuff. Things were pretty good then. We weren't making a lot of money, but we were making a living. But that was in '38, I guess. The Depression wasn't really over for a lot of people at that time. It wasn't over until after the War ended for some of them. But as far as making any amount of money, why he

didn't do that, but people were buying a real good little house and lot for around \$4,000. Some of which they afterwards sold for \$20,000.

MARICLE: Well, you just kept adding on to these houses down here during the War and after and you started that just by wood salvage that you picked up from where you were working?

BIEDENSTEIN: What you could pick up, what you could buy. You used to run into a lot of pretty good buys down on the dump.

MARICLE: I guess you had to be pretty alert to what was around and it would be some kind of a bargain?

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, it was mainly bargaining for the subdivision and everybody knew me and (?). It was (?) and they knew where to go with it.

MARICLE: You were fortunate to have a trade; something that you could do during the Depression, something that you could really use like that, farming and dairying and all that. I guess there were other people that didn't fair as well?

BIEDENSTEIN: There was quite a few that struggled along and made it pretty much on their own and didn't bother too much about that other ... The other deal was just the subsistence and that was the best you could get out of it.

MARICLE: Do you think most people managed though, I mean between welfare and jobs they could pick up?

BIEDENSTEIN: I don't think anybody would starve to death. I never heard of anybody starving to death. It might have been a pretty slow go, a lot of man hours.

MARICLE: Yes, I guess that's right.

BIEDENSTEIN: Anyway, they come through and like I say, they built a pretty good war machine in a hurry.

MARICLE: Yes, do you really think the war was more of a recovery thing than all of the programs of Roosevelt as far as pulling the country back?

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, they all worked together. Of course, when the war broke, why we knew that you were going to have to do it and do it fast. Because I don't think there were too much, well, there was some preparations made before this country got into it. I guess in '38 and along in there when it looked like it was coming and we done an awful lot of work for an awful big time.

MARICLE: That sort of went hand in hand with the other programs to sort of get everyone out of the Depression. Did you have any ... when the banks fell, did you lose any money that you had in banks or personally?

BIEDENSTEIN: No. The fact is the banks got enough business at the time and never did

close. There was a funny instance, in that bank president. When the people lined up at his bank to draw their money out, he met them personally out there and told them that they didn't have any worry and if they drew their money out, why don't ever come back because he didn't want to do business with them again and he lived up to it. Now there's a lot of them that did come up short, but he managed to survive and pay it off. Because if he lost it all, I couldn't have lost nothing there anyway.

MARICLE: You didn't have that much, huh?

BIEDENSTEIN: I didn't have that much to earn a living;

MARICLE: But tile people listened to him. What bank was that?

BIEDENSTEIN: Pine Lawn Bank.

MARICLE: And he actually went out there and spoke to them himself? Were you there or did you just hear?

BIEDENSTEIN: I was there. I knew the old boy pretty well.

MARICLE: When was this?

BIEDENSTEIN: '33.

MARICLE: About '33. And the people actually lined up to take out all their money ?

BIEDENSTEIN: Oh, yes.

MARICLE: Well, I guess some banks didn't fair so well, like you said?

BIEDENSTEIN: No, they closed them all up for a period of three or four days, something like that. And then after the examination, they let them open. The ones that were solvent, they let open again. They had the other one closed.

MARICLE: Why didn't the people listen to them, because a lot of them didn't?

BIEDENSTEIN: A lot of them didn't, but, I don't know, he was always a pretty honest sort of a fellow. I don't think he had an enemy in the world.

MARICLE: I guess he knew his people pretty well that banked with him, I mean personally?

BIEDENSTEIN: Yes, it made a difference.

MARICLE: That's interesting. And then of course, the securities, well of course, all that came from market crash, originally. And then, people too, that had jobs, I guess they didn't all keep them, right? A lot of people lost their jobs?

BIEDENSTEIN: Oh, there's a lot of them lost their jobs. But there was a good percentage of the people that worked. I mean, it wasn't a strict calamity because the economy had to roll on even at a low state. I don't know what the percentage of people who were really unemployed

was. The history books can tell you that I guess. I don't know what they tell you.

MARICLE: As far as you know, your friends and your family, I mean everybody was up doing something at least part of the time?

BIEDENSTEIN: At the time they did something.

MARICLE: And if they looked hard enough, they could find something to do?

BIEDENSTEIN: No, not steady jobs. They were pretty near impossible because there are so many of these corporations and companies, they had to lay off a certain amount of people and there was no use looking for a job there because if they wanted somebody back they'd call up somebody that had worked for them before and bring them in. When the economy dropped, oh, 15-20%, they got to lay off 15% of the people to balance it. And of course, that's what made the unemployment rate go by leaps and bounds and money to start the building industry (?). But we lived through it and I don't regret the days that were that way. I think we lived a whole lot easier than we do today.

MARICLE: Yes, I guess that's true in one sense. Of course, you really didn't know where you stood financially too much of the time, I guess.

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, that wasn't the matter. We were living, we had a place to sleep at night with something to eat.

MARICLE: You were glad to have it and you appreciated it?

BIEDENSTEIN: Definitely, we were thankful to have it when you knew there were a lot of people having a hard time doing that.

MARICLE: You went down into the cities a great deal during the Depression even though you lived out in the County?

BIEDENSTEIN: Oh, yes.

MARICLE: Well, in St. Louis were there much like bread lines and, you know, like the typical pictures you see, apples for 5 cents...?

BIEDENSTEIN: Yes, of course, that was just carried on in Washington; veterans doing that to get better benefits. I don't know whether it really helped any. But one thing it did do, they paid us a little WWI bonus. I don't know, I think it was 1935 or '36. The balance of it we were supposed to get a few years later. And I guess it knocked a little into the economy.

MARICLE: Yes, I guess making money available ...

BIEDENSTEIN: It all helped.

MARICLE: (can't understand)

BIEDENSTEIN: There was a lot of bread lines. There was a lot of people that just had a hard

time making connections. There was so damn many on welfare that it was impossible to take care of everybody. A lot of them didn't have any permanent address. They didn't know where they were. And they had to be fed.

MARICLE ; Were things consistent or did you feel they were getting better at the time? I mean now, of course, you could see they were getting better. But when you were in the middle of it, did you have some kind of faith in the future?

BIEDENSTEIN: You had to have or you wouldn't have been there? If you didn't have faith of things getting better, you sure couldn't have stayed. Oh, everybody plugged along, trying to get out and do what they could do. Of course, the good part about it then, the money you got, it wasn't money you could really do something with. I mean a couple of dollars meant a whole lot.

MARICLE: What were some of the other things you did or experiences that you had in your dealings and getting things and buying things; how you managed?

BIEDENSTEIN: I know one time I was hauling cattle for a friend of mine. It was over on the East side. I bought two butcher hogs for 3(? a pound, real choice stuff. Of course, I don't know whether you know comparison on that, but six months ago, hogs here were worth about 5 cents a pound.

MARICLE: I know of Schnucks.

BIEDENSTEIN: I think that was about the lowest they ever had. Of course, it rallied around that for several years, but that made it awful easy for a couple of big hogs to cost you about \$13.00. Now they cost you about 300, 350.

MARICLE: What would you do then with the hogs?

BIEDENSTEIN: Butcher them.

MARICLE: And sell it yourself?

BIEDENSTEIN: Divide it up with somebody else that needed it.

MARICLE: So actually, as far as it goes, there were, I'm sure, people that didn't have enough to eat. But you remember it as having enough to eat and getting if no ...

BIEDENSTEIN: I never felt that we wanted something to eat. I come awful close once in a while. But there was no money for anyone else.

MARICLE: What kind of things, you talked about the church activities and family picnics. What were some of the other kind of things that people did because no one had money for entertainment, but they must have improvised their own kind of social activities. What were some of the things that you did?

BIEDENSTEIN: We had a lot of barbecues. Like I said, when you had a dollar, you'd have a ball.

MARICLE: Did the churches help out people?

BIEDENSTEIN: To a certain extent they helped whatever they could. They were always trying to do something.

MARICLE: They gave more moral support than anything else?

BIEDENSTEIN: That's the main deal, they didn't have anything to do anything with.

MARICLE: You said people lost their homes or couldn't buy them in the first place, you mean like tenant farmers prior to the Depression, those are the ones that got thrown off their farms?

BIEDENSTEIN: Those that had big mortgages on them and couldn't pay.

MARICLE: Did you own your property?

BIEDENSTEIN: At that time, yes.

MARICLE: And did you lose that?

BIEDENSTEIN: That's all you could do. You couldn't make the payments on it. There was no way of making the money.

MARICLE: And then the banks take it over?

BIEDENSTEIN: yes.

MARICLE: Then what would they do with it?

BIEDENSTEIN: They were in the same boat you were.

MARICLE: Yes, that's what I mean. I guess the experience of having everyone ... do you think that made a difference, that everybody was in ...

BIEDENSTEIN: No, everybody wasn't in the same boat. There was a whole lot of them. But the bulk of the people still had incomes and still survived. I'd say the bigger percentage of them, but they weren't making any, they were all afraid of their jobs. I don't think anybody ever said a word about striking.

MARICLE: Yes. That's another thing. The labor unions. Like you say, you, yourself, for instance, wouldn't think of striking or anything like that because it wouldn't have made any sense, right? There was nothing there to strike for?

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, there was work going on, the government was doing some work and if you were on a government job, they would pay a prevailing wage and I don't know just how they did run it. They didn't get too many days work because they divided everything up ...

MARICLE- So every body would have some?

BIEDENSTEIN: Everybody would get a little bit out of it.

MARICLE: There are some people at that time, there were cries of socialism and the government going the way of all ... you know, losing our form of government and not creeping socialism in. Do you remember any of that ... that people were alarmed or were they just not that interested in politics? They were more interested in just keeping themselves together?

BIEDENSTEIN: There were a lot of people afraid of what was termed socialism, but it's like (can't understand). There's two of them that were communist. We didn't call them political parties, we'd call them liberals and conservatives. And the conservatives actually works one way and liberals works the other way.

MARICLE: In the Depression, of course, that was kind of a new thing; government-sponsored, government-funded work. Well, was it a new thing. Or do you really feel it had been going on all the time?

BIEDENSTEIN: No, it hadn't been going on all the time, it was built up to it. We had high wages before the Depression. I think carpenter's wages were about \$1.50 an hour.

MARICLE: Yes, did you belong to the union, then, before?

BIEDENSTEIN: Yes.

MARICLE: And all during the Depression or did you just drop out?

BIEDENSTEIN: No, how were you going to pay your dues?

MARICLE: Did anybody, I mean was here any interest in unions?

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, I guess there was some of the larger contractors that had some men going all the time. It wasn't a complete shut down.

MARICLE: Yes, just a slow down?

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, it was a big shut down, but not complete.

MARICLE: Aside from government work, was there any other kind of (?) that seemed to survive pretty well here in the city?

BIEDENSTEIN: Automobiles were produced, not too many; some of the best we ever had, if you ever drove them.

MARICLE: Made to last?

BIEDENSTEIN: They were made right.

MARICLE: I get the feeling you think the quality of work has slipped off in these years since then?

BIEDENSTEIN: Not so much as the work as the materials. They've gained a lot of things technically, but as far as holding up the product, I don't think they have really done that. Of course, you've got you radios, air conditioners, televisions or anything else you wanted today what you didn't have then. It was strictly what you'd have, a strip model now, what they're trying to put out. When you went to the gas stations, in them days you had to have a big automobile to get \$1.00 worth of gas.

MARICLE: I think that you'd say the Depression was good for the people and the country and that somehow ... Do you feel that a lot of people were that way? I don't mean that they were happy with it but ...

BIEDENSTEIN: No, they weren't happy with it.

MARICLE: But you felt they were learning something that was going to hold them in good stead later on?

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, it was brought on by inflation. It wasn't brought on by .. It's a big blow-up and bust, that's what the whole thing is.

MARICLE: Could you see that coming?

BIEDENSTEIN: No, nobody sees it coming. Nobody believes it.

MARICLE: I mean, you know, in 29, you know, in the '20's when there was a lot of prosperity?

BIEDENSTEIN: Yes, it was a prosperous time in the late '20's.

MARICLE: And you didn't have any sense of doom? It was all a real shock?

BIEDENSTEIN: Not like that.

MARICLE: One of those like this could never end you know, it's always going to go on producing?

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, the beauty of things then for most people, if they had a job they had transportation. We had good transportation during the Depression. We had good streetcar service, good buses.

MARICLE: In other words, you could get by without having a lot of things yourself? Like you really didn't need a car?

BIEDENSTEIN: That's right. But they advocated two cars in every garage and a chicken in every pot, but it didn't work. But it was the same for (can't understand). He put near made it. He had two cars in every garage usually, but neither one of them run.

MARICLE: And a chicken?

BIEDENSTEIN: No, he didn't have plenty to eat. I don't believe anybody ever suffered too

much . One food did the whole thing. There was a lot of rigmarole and a lot of ballyhooing about it. But you hear that today in the same way.

MARICLE: After you lost the little house and moved to the little farm, did you stay there for the rest of the time?

BIEDENSTEIN: Just about. There's another instance that I can recall now which I had forgot up to now. And that was when my oldest daughter was born. We had a doctor that came to the house and he brought the damnedest bunch of paraphernalia with him you ever seen and took care of my wife, took care of everything and I believe the whole delivery amounted to about \$20.00. Then I had the experience with other doctors the same way. They'd come to the house and one in particular. When the one boy was sick he stopped by the house three times a day for three or four days in a row. And I asked him how he ever expected to be paid for all them visits. He said, "If I was expecting pay for them, I wouldn't have made the first one." It seemed like most of the doctors you run into in those days was about in the same category. Not the way they are today. You got to be sick in the right place today or you're in awful shape.

MARICLE: You mentioned the house that you lived in that we're in right now. You bought that in 1936?

BIEDENSTEIN: '37.

MARICLE: How did you come about getting that house?

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, that was ... I made a down payment on it with the bonus that we got at the time, about a year before, somewhere along in there. And then I borrowed enough money to make a down payment.

MARICLE: And where did you borrow the rest of the money?

BIEDENSTEIN: I borrowed the rest from this real estate man that sold it to me. He had a 90% mortgage on it. I had a payment of about \$64.00 a month plus taxes that I had to meet. I didn't know where I was going to meet the first one, but I was going to try.

MARICLE: But it worked out?

BIEDENSTEIN: And it worked out and I'm still here. I've still got it.

MARICLE: Now that was later. Now before earlier, we were talking 'about entertainment, what people did, and we talked about family picnics, and church and things. And you belonged to a particular one of the veterans. You did a lot of ...

BIEDENSTEIN: American Legion.

MARICLE: American Legion.

BIEDENSTEIN: We used to have what they called "boxed suppers", I think is what they really called them. Each one would take a boxed supper and then they would bid them and

raise a little money for the Post that way. and whoever lunch you bought, you shared it with him. It was something for amusement. And then we'd have card games and other little things that the Legion Post in those days then, you'd have a legion meeting, put near all the members would be there because they didn't have anything else to do.

MARICLE: Sure fire attendance rating.

BIEDENSTEIN: Oh, yes. That helped a lot. There were plenty places you could go if you had money, but nobody seemed to have enough money to do a whole lot with. And then, all in all things worked out pretty good I think.

MARICLE: They even had their poker games you were talking about the poker game?

BIEDENSTEIN: Oh, yes. Poker games then were like they are now. They would start small and get big. You wondered where they got the money, but there was always somebody had a little bit of money go gamble with.

MARICLE: Now early somehow or another, you planned a surprise and this was early in the Depression, for your wife. She was going out of town and you somehow or other had gotten hold of some pigs along the way. How does this story go?

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, I think they were some pigs that were given to me that were runts. Somebody didn't want them and I nursed them along and got them up to a point to when I sold them, I acquired enough to buy an electric refrigerator.

MARICLE: That was a very big deal in those days. About the early '30's?

BIEDENSTEIN: That was a big deal, about '35, I guess. But that was the real thing and we needed it because we didn't, at the time, we were milking 67 cows and had use for it aid we didn't have to monkey with ice.

MARICLE: And then you could put your milk right into the refrigerator?

BIEDENSTEIN: Yes.

MARICLE: Well, that must have been one of the first refrigerator ... how long had electric refrigerator ... in the '20's?

BIEDENSTEIN: In the '20's, about '25.

MARICLE: But they were still fairly expensive then? About what did you have to pay for a refrigerator?

BIEDENSTEIN: Yes, I think it was only about \$120, around there.

MARICLE: Yes, I guess that was a very nice surprise to come home and see a nice refrigerator there. Now. along with food, of course, an important thing in everyday life, is your clothing, your wearing apparel. Were there any special tricks that you had or things that you did in order to buy or get clothes economically during the Depression?

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, yes. A lot of it was hand-me-downs. That was a big part of it. And then, of course, being around where we had stock feed chicken feed, and cattle feed and all that, it came in the sacks. I guess they called it calico sacks, floured sacks, some of it would just plain writing on it, a lot of the undergarments were made out of that stuff. And little girls dresses and stuff like that you could make that. And the little boys stuff and once in a while, you'd come up with some oddities on it. I remember one instance where a pair of one of the kids shorts come with the lettering across the back which said 'scratch' and things like that could happen. But clothing was cheap, I mean what you had to buy; shoes didn't amount to too much, if you had the \$2.00. Of course, there was, like today, a lot of hand-me-down stuff that turned out to be pretty good.

MARICLE: Yes, well people still do that today with their kids. They keep it from one child to the next.

BIEDENSTEIN: Yes, a pair of jeans and dungarees we called them, would cost maybe a dollar, up to a pretty good size. Maybe all the way up to a pretty good size, maybe all the way up to a man's size, you could buy them for a dollar. And they lasted quite a while.

MARICLE: So sewing and the feed sack ... of course, a lot of the feed sack things are coming back now.

BIEDENSTEIN: Oh, yes, they'd bring a premium today if you had them.

MARICLE: Yes, they'd be nostalgia.

BIEDENSTEIN: Now everything like that comes in paper, everything is disposable.

MARICLE; Well, I guess what it amounted to is what it sounds like. You used everything that you had. Like people would use crates for fuel, they'd gather up wood, they'd get feed sacks and make clothes out of them. It was a matter of being very inventive and conserve. You seem to make use of everything that you had. You didn't waste much.

BIEDENSTEIN: The farmer in them days didn't worry too much about energy, all he needed was a couple of gallons of coal oil a year. He produced his own fertilizer. He produced all his own power; had his horses to do the work and furnish the fertilizer. And that made a lot of difference, especially on a bigger operation.

MARICLE: Yes. Was it mainly horsepower?

BIEDENSTEIN: Yes. There was farm machinery then, that six to eight horses for one piece of equipment, big stuff.

MARICLE: Alright, Mr. Biedenstein, is there anything to sort of finish it up here, wrap it up or your general feeling about the Depression and how it relates to us today or if it does?

BIEDENSTEIN: Oh, I think there's a lot of poor people today that don't live near as good as we could in the Depression. Because whatever they need, it cost so darn much, they can't get a hold of the money. And if they got kids, they can't pick up the stuff the way we did. Some stuff they can, but I think we were a lot better off in the Depression than the poor ones are

today.

MARICLE: And you feel there was some similarity between ...

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, it's kind of a matter of course. The world runs in cycles and this is another cycle. That's all there is to it. Let's hope it's a better cycle.

MARICLE: Maybe they've learned something from the Depression that won't happen again?

BIEDENSTEIN: Well, I don't know whether they did or not. I'm not going to say they did.

MARICLE: Not you nor anyone else I guess?

BIEDENSTEIN: They might have learned it but did they remember it, that's the thing.

MARICLE: Yes, I think that's right. Well, I think that kind of sums it up and I want to thank you Mr. Biedenstein for sharing your thoughts with us, your memories. I wish you well in the future. Thank you very much.

BIEDENSTEIN: Thank you.