Overview
1. Lake Bonneville and how it provided good soil; it prepared the way for Mormon orchards
2. Increase in population = decrease in orchards
3. Orem particularly was the best climate, but it took water and an intricate canal system and a transportation system to ship fruit
4. Boom in interurban railroads, such as Walter Orem’s (Oscar Andersen had the idea to ask him to put the station there and name it after him)
5. Fruits grown here and where they were shipped: midwest, Salt Lake, mining towns, Uintah basin (to trade in kind)
6. Geneva Steel built in Vineyard; beginning of decline of fruit industry (population boom); people began to move out
7. Women joined the workforce and stopped canning; there was a shift to non-canning fruit like apples
8. Chinese dumping has basically killed all our apples
9. Orem is a chaotic, sprawling community; they never had a zoning plan or housing system to protect orchards
10. Family tradition of hauling fruit (their father did it); family shipping has all disappeared—it’s big business now; shippers always struggled to make any money (and hence fruit growers also)
11. The industry peaked in the forties and by the fifties it started declining
12. They knew they couldn’t make any money in farming so both went into academia
13. When their father finally sold the orchard in the 60’s
14. The fuzz from peaches once burnt down Oscar Andersen’s barn
15. [Now the whole family has joined in] Talking about their backgrounds in farming
16. How their children were influenced by the orchards (not very much); people are starting to lose their connection with the land through farming, politicians also
17. Favorite memories: everyone worked on farms, esp. during harvest and esp. during the War
18. Morris Ercanbrack has been farming for 53 years, since he graduated from high school
19. Memories of planting strawberries as a child, hand thinning fruits
20. Cold storage has made apples a year-round crop, and there’s no more canning
21. The SCERA: digging the hole, how they met in the lobby, then were married in the lobby
22. One of their mothers wanted to win a Victrolla by selling subscriptions to the old newspaper; she was in charge of selling the bonds for the SCERA
23. The SCERA program did more than anything else unify Orem through 1) the programs run through it, and 2) the theater (which was really the city center; best theater in state outside of
Salt Lake or Ogden) (music, choral, dance, art, bands, etc.) – it was the beginning of culture in Orem
24. More details on getting married in the SCERA lobby
25. Every event in anybody’s life always occurred in the SCERA; not just movies
26. One of them descended from Joseph Booth; the old home is restored but the neighborhood is unrecognizable
27. “I have fond memories but I wouldn’t want to live there” — it’s so unorganized, has no central character, and traffic is abominable, the orchard remnants disgraceful
28. It’s sad — in 1977 — to see all the houses tearing out the orchards
PL: I am Paul Larsen. I was born on a dairy general crops farm down in Vineyard just above the steel plant. We had a garden-variety operation as well as dairy and other general crops. We grew tomatoes, vegetables, and a little bit of fruit, but not much. Later, when I was in high school we moved onto a fruit farm in Orem where we had primarily peaches, but also apricots, pears and prunes. Neither our farm, nor most farms in the mid-years of World War II, had very many apples. Apples are more of a recent venture in most of the fruit industries in Utah.

I should indicate the reasons for the fruit industries’ locations in the state. It ties in very closely with the character of the land, the sites, and the soils and the climate associated with Lake Bonneville. As Lake Bonneville receded and left benches and as the canyons of the Wasatch eroded away and left alluvial fans in various places, those alluvial fans in the benches were characterized by open or porous or fairly well aerated soils. The soil was often sandy, gravelly, and in the case of Orem there were big rocks, but they are very good for orchard trees—not good for sugar beets or corn. The eastern part of the valleys, on the west slope of the Wasatch, the bench lands around Brigham City, Willard and North Ogden down to Kaysville and Layton through Salt Lake and Utah Valleys to Santaquin (which is the terminal point of the Wasatch front) are where fruit plantings were located.

When the Mormon Pioneers came, they brought young trees or seeds and quickly developed orchards or other types of fruit plantings. Many of those are still scattered in various places, but essentially as the population of the Wasatch Front has increased then the quantity and quality of the fruit plantings have declined. It’s almost a direct correlation between increase in population and the demands of highways, schools and housing and the decline in orchards.

Orem is particularly important because, more than any other area, it had the greatest landmass (meaning the largest and most level flat bench) and it also had very good air drainage. The cold air of winter and the frosts of spring could drain off into Utah Lake, and therefore you had the best chance for growing fruit. It developed really in a very limited context, most of it was down in the sand hills of Vineyard, until they got water on the Provo bench. Even after the canal system was developed, you still did not have viable fruit operations until they had better transportation. They had very rocky roads. If the fruit was to be taken off the bench it had to be hauled by wagon down to Provo and then put on the railroad. The canals came in probably the early part of the twentieth century. Around 1910 was when they put the dam in Provo Canyon and brought water on the bench using the Murdoch Canal. In that year, there was a young man by the name of Oscar Anderson that bought a sagebrush farm on what is now 8th North in Orem and Canyon Road. He started grubbing out sagebrush and got water on it; he planted peach trees, raspberries, strawberries, I suppose. In 1913 when he got married they moved their home there. I mention his name because it became evident that the people on the bench had to have better transportation to get their fruit off the Provo Bench, if they were going to make a living at it. At the same time there was a movement of inner-urban railroads. The Banburger Railroad was completed from Salt Lake to Ogden and then the Utah Central put in an inner-urban train from there into Cache Valley. Walter Orem was an entrepreneur in Salt Lake and started the Utah Southern down through Utah County with the intent of going to Payson, which it did. Young Oscar Anderson rode around to the neighbors and organized a commercial club, what we would now call a Chamber of Commerce. He made an appointment with Mr. Orem and proposed if
Orem would put in a siting that they would name a town after him. Orem agreed and that siting was on the westside of State Street on about 7th North, and that’s also how Orem got its name.

The orchards grew and they did very well during the 1920’s and the terrible problems during the depression of the 1930’s. They really made money during the war years roughly 1940 to almost into the 1950’s. The number one crop was peaches and pears were probably second. They grew a lot of strawberries, a lot of raspberries, some apricots, later on sour cherries came in and quite a lot of sweet cherries, but not very many apples. They shipped the peaches east as far as Chicago, but the majority of them went to the ranches of the western part of the mid-west: Nebraska, some Wyoming, and a few into Kansas. That was when the housewives of America still did canning. The bottled peaches, pears, plums, and Italian Prunes, were the stable fruits for the winter.

A lot of the mixed fruits, particularly the very perishable soft fruits like strawberries, raspberries and the sweet cherries, went to the Salt Lake Farmer’s Market. The old Salt Lake Farmers Market was where the Sheridan is now. When Dean and I were kids, the old road around the point of the mountain was a switch back road, narrow road, and you always had a flat tire going over it.

Another major element of the markets was the mining camps. One of the reasons that they wanted a railroad site is because they could get nearly a direct haul into the mining camps in Eureka, Price and Sunnyside in Carbon County, and as far south as Marysville through San Pete and Sevier County. In addition, they could haul it out into the Uinta Basin—not for money but for trade. We’d ship a mixed load of tomatoes and peaches and other crops, and we’d come back with a load of lambs, chickens, calves, hides, turkeys, and Guinea hens. That’s they way it was done particularly during the 1930’s.

A very clear day in my memory is the Deseret News one Sunday morning early in 1942 said a new steel plant was to be built in Vineyard, Utah and that was the beginning of the decline of the fruit industry for the Provo Bench. At the height of construction of Geneva Steel there were some 10,000 people employed, many of them from out of state. They started building small houses on Provo bench, and they had to tear out orchards to do it. That started the real expansion of population in this county. If you look at the population then, we had probably less than 50,000 people in all of Utah County and it’s now 370,000.

DL: About that time the population of Orem was 2,000.

PL: Yes, the population of Orem was about 2,000, and from then on you had a gradual decline until about 20 years after WWII and by then the orchard was pretty well disrupted. You had some of the people move from Orem, the Rolleys, Farnsworths, Fowlers, and a number of others moved over to Santaquin, Genoa, and Payson. Some of them kept farms in Orem and gradually phased them out. There was another thing that was happening the same time; I’ll call it the cultural change. Women went to work in town and didn’t can at home, or it was easier to buy canned fruit from California than it was to bottle peaches from the Provo Bench. Particularly it was noticeable in the ranch country, in the farm country, in Wyoming, Nebraska, and those places where a lot of the fruit went to. You had a shift away from the canning crop such as
peaches and pears and into apples. Sour Cherries became a popular crop particularly in Michigan. But in the past quarter of a century, the heavy emphasis has been on apples.

For ten straight years, roughly during the late eighties and through the nineties, apples were a profitable crop. Unfortunately this last administration paid precisely zero attention to the laws of fair market practices and the opened market situation. The Chinese apple situation essentially put a lot of apple producers out of business in the United States. Even the apple growers that had done fairly well in the south end of the county have had a real rough go the last few years.

That gives you a little overview. Orchards, homes and schools are not compatible, not in the way that it’s done in Orem. Orem is a scattered, chaotic community. It’s sprawled from Provo to Pleasant Grove. If Orem had had a good zoning or planning program way back with a city center, they could have developed a system of housing that might have protected some areas for the continuation of orchards. But I sort of doubt it because it was an escalation of land prices. The two Gillman brothers owned the land that became Word Perfect on 16th North in Orem and they got wealthy when that land was zoned for industrial development. Now, that’s only one example. If you take the case of our father, Gary Olsen Larsen, if he had been a little wiser and held onto his farm in Orem, maybe Dean and I would both be millionaires instead of poor ex-university types. Orange County, California and Santa Clara County, California and a number of others such as Barion County, Michigan used to be the bread baskets for fruit and vegetables in the United States. They essentially disappeared and that will continue to happen in Orem.

DL: You might want to mention hauling the fruit into Wyoming and Nebraska since our father and others did it.

PL: A lot of people in Orem used to either load trucks for shipment to the mid-west or into Wyoming or other places. Now we used to haul some produce ourselves, peddled different places. Both Dean and I have worked for a man that had a regular route up in the dude and cattle ranches in Wyoming—that no longer exists. We used to load many truckloads of tomatoes, apricots, and various other fruit, particularly peaches. During the war and for years after, primarily peaches were hauled bulk. We’d take a truckload that would be five up to ten tons, which is much smaller than what they now have. We would load four or five hundred bushels into a truck just by dumping them in. Then they would high tail it day and night until they got to Kansas City or to Manhattan, Kansas or Lincoln Nebraska or somewhere. Then they’d box the fruit, and that’s the way they’d be sold to the ranches.

There was a lot of that, but it’s all disappeared. I’ll give you one example, the fellow that had the route in Wyoming he and I took a load of apricots. We thought we would make a million dollars. We got to Sydney, Nebraska and ran into George Stratton from Orem. He said, “You’re too late. The market is already flooded, and you’d better head back into Colorado. Maybe you can dump them in Denver.” We ended up in Fort Morgan, Colorado which was the home of the famous orchestra leader Glenn Miller. We sorted the whole load out, threw half away, and practically gave the rest away.
DL: I had a similar experience with the same man. We broke down and had a load of cherries in Wyoming. We went off the road into the sagebrush and had to throw about half away. We did make it to Nebraska and sold the rest of the load, and I think he came out all right.

PL: By contrast, in some cases you made a lot of money on those loads. For example, there was this man who lived in Manhattan, Kansas by the name of Harry Parker. He had his own truck and for a while he had three trucks on the road. He hauled produce from Florida, Texas, Arizona, California, and Utah into Kansas for about 50 years. He died a few years ago, and before he died he told me that the most money he ever made on a single load was a thousand dollars on a load of apricots he loaded at my Dad’s place. The glory days of the Provo Bench got their start in the late teens—World War I gave them the push. The 1920’s were pretty good, the 1930’s were nearly a disaster, the 1940’s were the cream of the industry—where they really made money, and the 50’s were up and down, so-so. By that time the decline had started with housing and other problems. So that’s about where I would put it.

RA: What were your particular jobs in the orchards or more of the shipping?

PL: As boys we both worked on the farms. A farm kid at that time had multiple jobs, not only on the farm but sometimes you had to haul produce to get rid of it. We picked tomatoes and then hauled them to the market in Salt Lake or out at the Uinta Basin or somewhere.

DL: We had a three-year contract with Utah State Hospital. At that time, the patients canned for the winter.

PL: So we hauled them to our cannery.

DL: My wife’s mother was on the first board of the what’s now the Central Utah Medical Center, the Utah Valley hospital which was established in 1939. At the first board meeting they decided they would can tomatoes for the patients. Oh, peaches.

PL: In our case, we knew that we couldn’t make a living farming and so we were fortunate enough to go to college. Dean became Associate Director of Libraries at Brigham Young University and I bounced around the country as a professor of horticulture and then a university bureaucrat. I spent my early years getting my education at Utah State University, Kansas State University, and Michigan State University. I spent another 14 years as a professor at Michigan State University working very closely in extension research with the orchard industries there. I spent another 14 years as head of the NU Research Center at Wenatchee, Washington, which was the largest apple research center in the world at that time. We acquired, with a group of others, their own 240-acre apple orchard. I was also responsible for the care, upkeep, sales, and research of another thousand acres. Then the last ten years I became Vice President of Extension and other activities at Utah State University.

JL: When did you Dad sell the orchard then?

PL: He sold the orchard to Lamar Farley didn’t he?
DL: No, Ferguson.

PL: No, the house he sold to Ferguson. Part of the orchard he sold to Stan Farley first. It must have been in the late 1960’s when he sold the orchard, wasn’t it? I left in 1948.

DL: I was away on a mission in 1951 when the present Orem Center Street went through west. There was no Orem Center Street, it went right through and took the whole side of our farm, it took part of the orchard and part open ground.

JL: That was about the time of they stopped shipping fruit.

PL: Yes, it was about that time.

DL: My wife Jean, her parents lived over. There were two big shipping and packing plants for Orem, one still exists out there but of course, it’s not a fruit plant.

JL: On 4th South.

PL: I mentioned that Oscar Anderson rode his horse around and organized a commercial club. On September 10, 1948 I married his younger daughter. At that time they were packing peaches in the shed down near the Orem railroad. Most of the peaches were the old Alberta variety which were very fuzzy. They ran them through brushes in order to take the fuzz off and make them smooth. The fuzz collected and it was terrible, like cotton and terribly itchy. They got too much fuzz and a motor overheated. The fuzz caught on fire and our wedding night it burned that whole big plant down. It caught her Dad’s barn on fire which was about a quarter of a mile away.

JL: Not quite. We packed peaches and we’d take them over to the packing plant. It was like festival, peach time, because everybody was doing it. You had to work long hours and it was horrible work with the fuzz. But you picked all day and then everyone had their own sorters and facing units and we’d pack them and then took them over to be shipped.

DL: How much of a nursery was there when your grandfather came in 1903?

JL: He had about 10 acres of nursery, but they had the whole 30 planted.

DL: He planted and they sold nursery stock and her grandfather was able to buy that property at a tax sale from the Klingers because the taxes hadn’t come in. Klingers had the nursery. Now Paul wrote the book Out On a Limb which I tried to get him to put in the Brigham Young University library and he wouldn’t, but I have a copy I can loan you. It would have been useful already.

PL: No, because most of what’s in that book is about the fruit industry of Michigan and Washington.

DL: It has some early information in it.
PL: The major monthly fruit publication of the United States is called *The American Fruit Grower*, and in this region they call it the *Western Fruit Grower*. I wrote a column for them in every issue for 25 years called “Out on a Limb,” and that’s where that comes from.

RA: All four of you grew up on orchards in Orem? You were on a farm as well producing saplings?

DL: She never was involved in saplings.

RA: But they bought the nursery?

DL: Her grandfather bought the nursery and then he developed the fruit farm. By the time she got there in 1931 it was…

PL: … Lorna Anderson Larsen. She had the reputation when we lived in Washington state of being the very best apple and cherry picker in the whole valley.

LL: When we were younger we all picked fruit.

JL: We all picked strawberries, raspberries, cherries, that was the way we earned our money.

PL: Peaches and pears.

JL: Yes, and so we all learned to work on the farm.

LL: Everybody picked apples up there NU.

PL: One fall she decided she wanted to buy our daughters sewing machines. So she picked enough apples to pay for two of them. Then I took pity on her and decided that she needed one and so we ended up buying four sewing machines, but she only picked enough apples for two of them.

LL Cindy bought here own, I have to give her credit.

RA: Did she pick to earn the money?

LL: No, she was working in a store some place. Well, she picked too.

PL: I think she was at BYU then.

JL: By the time our kids came along they didn’t work the orchards at all.

DL: Our folks still had an apple orchard we’d go out there and pick with our boys.

LL: And my sister’s family had cherry orchard there clear until…

JL: One of the main reasons I picked is because his job provided a house for us in the middle of the research station orchards. We could just step out the back door and pick cherries or apricots.

PL: We had 100 acres of orchards around us.

JL: So the kids they came out onto a farm NU.

DL: I took my two sons and we picked apples. I was able to get about 20 bushels of apples in my van and then we went out to the Uinta Basin and started peddling apples. I thought they needed the experience. We sold apples and got up to Mountain Home and we traded apples for honey, like we used to do in the 1930’s when we were poor and we were trading fruit for livestock.

RA: How old were your sons when you did that?

DL: Six and Nine.

RA: The orchards are disappearing but the people who work on them want to pass down the legacy to their children. We are interested in how that’s being carried on in spite of the orchards disappearing. Are there other ways that your children were influenced by the orchards?

DL: I don’t think our children were influenced as much by the orchards because by then we had left and gone to school.

JL: I think our kids were the only ones from Washington State NU even though they were from 6th grade on up, they really learned to appreciate the orchards.

PL: They picked fruit.

JL: Yes, they picked fruit.

PL: We had an LDS welfare pear orchard. There were two jobs: the people would thin the fruit in June and pick the fruit in August. Our kids worked right along with us thinning and picking. But our kids all picked. I don’t know whether NU or not, but the others all picked fruit there.

I think you’ve hit on a very important point. There was a time, even in our lifetime when about a third of the population back in the 1930’s was still associated with the farms. They knew where food came from, and they knew the real hard knocks of growing and getting food, and what it meant to work. Now 2% of the population are farmers. For the most part that farming is done on the seat of a tractor. It’s not like it used to be. Unfortunately a lot of our politicians are just as ignorant about where food comes from as the younger people. They think it comes from the milk carton in the store or that the peaches come from Mexico, but they don’t care, or have the slightest comprehension of the problems that agriculture is faced with and what it means to be a part of it.
JL: When our grandson learned about his grandfather’s job in the fruit industry—writing books and things—he said, “Why is there so much written about apples? I thought you just stuck a tree in the ground and it grew.” That was Andrew, he was 16 then.

RA: What are some of your favorite memories of working on the orchards as children?

JL: I think harvest time because everybody was involved and during the war they let out school. Everybody in the family had a job to do and nobody could say, “I’ve got to go do something else during the harvest time.” Everybody had to work and you worked long, hard hours. This was the same thing whether it be NU or the berries and we would pick raspberries…

DL: …starting at 5 o’clock in the morning.

JL: We would pick beginning at five until noon and take a break through the hot part of the day until 2:30 and pick until six. Families worked together, but also you would try to recruit your friends or others that didn’t have farms.

DL: Towards the end, that’s when we began to have a few migrant workers from Mexico.

JL: That would be in the 1960’s and 1970’s.

DL: Morris Ercanbrack, who I went to high school with and graduated in 1948, has been running a fruit farm since that time. He still has quite a big acreage doesn’t he?

PL: Well his acreage is substantially reduced in Orem, but he’s got another orchard over in the Payson area. Morris still lives in Orem.

LL: I remember planting tomatoes and strawberries. The children, which I was at that time, would be on their hands and knees. I can still hear the rhythm of that shovel. The man would step on the shovel, lift it up, and the child would put the tomato and the strawberry under it, the shovel would go up and we’d go on another 12 inches all the way down the rows.

PL: That was nearly always on Memorial Day when you’re out of school and after the last freeze or about that time. The two most miserable jobs that we ever had was hand sorting of sugar beets and hand sorting of Alberta peaches with that fuzz. Particularly when it is hot, like 95 or 100 degrees.

JL: But Alberta peaches were the very best.

PL: Yes, at that time.

JL: Yes, the harvest time was also canning time and everybody that had farms also did canning.

RA: When I was a child, I remember my mother canning peaches and cherries every year and she doesn’t now.

LL: You can buy fresh fruit all year long or frozen fruit.
DL: Our eating habits have changed dramatically.

PL: One of the reasons apples took over as the major fruit crop in America is because at one time you picked them, you ate them, you canned them, you put a few in the cellar and they didn’t last very long. So apple was a fall crop. Now the apples that you’re buying in Smith’s or Albertson’s Grocery Store today were picked in Wenatchee, Washington on 15th of September of last year and will continue to be sold until the next crop comes on the 15th of next year.

DL: Cold storage has made the difference.

PL: Cold storage, controlled atmosphere storage, all these other modern things have made a year-round crop, you can store them forever.

JL: You mean they’re just refrigerated?

PL: They’re refrigerated and they’re in a carefully controlled atmosphere where you lower the oxygen down to essentially nothing. You raise the carbon dioxide up and so you put them dead asleep. You stop respiration in it’s tracks and you have them refrigerated to within one half of 1% of freezing, so they’re really put to sleep. It’s like giving them a shot of chloroform and then kicking them when they wake up.

DL: That’s why they are as crisp and fresh when you buy them as when you picked them. It’s better than keeping them in a root cellar like we used to.

JL: NU ice chest. The ice house was next to the packing plant.

RA: Do you remember things like the construction of the SCERA?

MULTIPLE VOICES: Yes.

PL: I’m going to tell you two things about the SCERA. When I was in the 7th or 8th grade at the old Lincoln Junior High, one day a fellow and I went over to watch them dig the deepest hole that we had ever seen at and that was the digging of the SCERA theater.

RA: Not the swimming pool?

PL: No, the theater.

DL: The swimming pool came before the theater.

PL: After it was completed, there was a sweet young girl that worked in the ice cream parlor that I used to go and visit. The sweet young girl and I got fairly friendly, and they used to have those love seats, the double seats, so you could sit two in a seat and enjoy the movie much more. Then we were married in the lobby of the SCERA theater.
JL: My mother was a master sales person. She lived on a farm and she would go with her father to peddle fruit and vegetables and whatever we had on the farm. When she was 18 or so they had a contest to sell subscriptions to the…

DL: … Provo Post, the predecessor of the Daily Herald.

JL: She entered the contest because they announced there were three prizes. The first prize was a Model T Ford. The second prize was…

LL: …a Victrola…

JL: …and she wanted that Victrola. The people running the contest gave little hope that anybody would be able to win it because they had professional sales people that were coming in to do this. So she sold subscriptions all throughout Orem.

DL: And Vineyard and Lakeview.

JL: She had a friend whose grandfather was wealthy, and he them take his Model T all over the county. She won first prize, the Model T.

LL: It was not appropriate for a young woman to have a model T in those days.

JL: She had to sell it so she could buy her own Victrola.

LL: She shared the proceeds with her father, brother, and sister. She sent them to school. She had a way of selling anything to anyone. When they decided to build the SCERA, it was a community effort? Do you know what the SCERA stands for?