

**NEW MEXICO
FARM & RANCH
HERITAGE
MUSEUM**

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW ABSTRACT

CONSULTANT: Austin "Slim" Green

DATE OF BIRTH: June 10, 1916 GENDER: Male

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: Tapes One and Two: 12/11/99 and 1/15/2000
Tapes Three thru Eight: 10/20/04, 10/27/04, 12/2/04
Tape Nine: 7/12/05

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Tapes One and Two: Green Home in Las Cruces, NM
Tapes Three thru Nine: Farm and Ranch Museum

INTERVIEWER(S): Tapes One and Two: Clint Bellows
Tapes Three and Four: Donna Wojcik
Tapes Five and Six: Cameron Saffell
Tapes Seven and Eight: Donna Wojcik
Tape Nine: Holly Radke

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM X OTHER _____

TRANSCRIBED: Yes: Final completed August 25, 2006

NUMBER OF TAPES: Eight

ABTRACTOR(S): Clint Bellows, Sheila Klug, Donna Wojcik, Bob Cogswell

DATE ABSTRACTED: Final Abstract completed August 29, 2006

RECORDING QUALITY (SPECIFY): All tapes good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Early data concerns Green's parents and their settlement in Texas.
Chronological report of Green's life, service in Army during WWII, progress and work as a saddlemaker, demonstrations on his techniques, specific information regarding the "Pony Track" saddle design.

DATE RANGE: Civil War to 2005

ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

TAPE ONE, SIDE A:

Slim describes his paternal grandfather's flight from Missouri to Texas during the Civil War because he thought he had killed a northern sympathizer. Slim's father, Arthur C. Green, was born in Texas. At age twenty-six, he went to Missouri to find, and get acquainted with his relative. While there, he met and married Green's mother, Euga L. Jennings. Her grandfather Wynn owned a farm near Centralia, Missouri, and Green relates Grandfather Wynn's stories concerning Quantrill's guerillas and the Centralia Massacre. His grandfather placed these events shortly after the Civil War. [Mr. Green cannot verify the accuracy of these stories.]

Although his Grandfather Green was a Southerner, he helped the black families in the area and was known as "the father of Cook County." Slim's father worked as an accountant for several gin mills in Oklahoma, where Slim was born. Eventually the family settled in Texas. Mr. Green recounts how the town of Gene Autry got its name

Slim left Texas in 1940, and moved to Santa Fe, where he did repair work in a saddle shop owned by Red Myrick, whom he had met while apprenticed to "Pop" Bettis in Lubbock, Texas. He then went to work for a large saddle company in Colorado until he was drafted.

TAPE ONE, SIDE B:

When someone noticed that his records said that he was a rodeo hand, he was assigned to the cavalry, shoeing horses, but he soon found himself working on various leather projects. He made desk plaques for many officers, and one for President Roosevelt. Years later, his daughter saw it at the President's former home at Hyde Park, New York.

Slim is proud of the fact that he designed and made most of the tools he used in his work. He talks about various saddles he made and how much he was paid for them, plus his plans to dispose of them as well as his tools. He also discusses the reasons for his dislike of labor unions, and why he resolved never to work in a union.

After the war, he married his wife, with whom he had been corresponding. She was a teacher and taught for forty years. They had one daughter.

He was very successful making saddles for women riders, and was careful never to make any saddle identical to another. He talks about how successful women have become as riders. In addition to saddle making, he also worked as a wrangler.

TAPE TWO, SIDE A:

Slim graduated from high school in 1934. He started rodeo while still in high school and continued on weekends after high school, and while in the service. He helped put on a rodeo in Fort Riley, Kansas, and he believes this is the first rodeo ever held on an army base.

Slim first started learning to make saddles while still in high school by working for a harness and saddle repair company in exchange for materials. He started making saddles in 1936, as well as making his own tools. Although he is now retired, he still enjoys working with children, and helping them to make simple leather objects.

After Mr. Green publicly “chewed out” a captain for copying his patterns, his good friend, a colonel, suggested that he go to Officer Candidate School. When he learned that in order to graduate from OCS he had to agree to stay in the army, he declined and was transferred to the Quartermaster Corps. From there he was sent immediately overseas to the Philippines. His job was to inspect tents, but whenever he had the time he worked in occupational therapy in the hospitals.

TAPE TWO, SIDE B:

After the war, he worked with Burton Brown for a time, and also started working with celebrities. He made a deal with a friend, Roy Butler, to corral his horses for him. He taught Robert Duval how to ride and also worked with Richard Egan, Terry Moore, and Ryan O’Neil. He also doubled for Richard Egan in his movies. He made special harnesses designed to break at a certain point for the movie *The Man From Laramie*. Later, he became friends with Robert Wagner and Jill St. John, and did some repair work for John Wayne. He also made a saddle for Robert Redford.

Finally, he discusses how imported saddles have changed the business.

TAPE THREE, SIDE A: [Note: The sessions (tapes three thru eight) were also videotaped]

Saddle maker benches are handmade, and Slim built his own workbench. He names each tool and discusses the use of each one. Emphasis is placed on the knives he uses for cutting and splitting the leather. Striking the knife blade sharply against a hard surface, and listening to the tone it makes checks the temper of the blade. The knives are subjected to honing, strapping and occasional heat, and over time will lose temper. Casing or wetting of the leather is critical to his craft. He describes wetting the leather, and wrapping it in sheepskin overnight to soften it. The next day, the leather appears dry, but when held against the cheek, the moisture can be felt.

He lists locations of his saddles across the United States. Green says he is the only saddle maker nominated to the Congress of Arts in Washington, D.C.

Other tools include awls; a pricking wheel; and a creaser or beader used to mark a stitch line in the leather. Slim’s hand stitching in saddles is one of his trademarks, for example, sewing by six. This means that he is using six strands of thread, twisted and waxed. Each stitch is then tied off before the next is started. This prevents unraveling of the stitch line, which is common with machine stitching. Spoke shaves are used in the seat of the saddle. He actually shaves the leather in the seat so that there are no ridges or bubbles, and the seat is “as smooth as can be.” This produces the smooth finish found in his saddles.

Early in Slim’s career, he was advised to visit dentists, and get their old and broken instruments. The hexagonal shape of the handle makes the tool easier to hold, and manipulate while working. These can easily be modified to saddle making.

The leather puncher comes in varying sizes, to make different sized holes. These are the only tools that Mr. Green didn’t make.

TAPE THREE, SIDE B:

The edger helps make the edges of a belt or a purse, or a saddle. As with his other tools, Slim has several of different sizes for making thinner or deeper cuts. Special attention is given to the saddle horn. While

the leather is still wet, squeeze it together all the way around, run the pricking wheel on the top, sew and trim it. Then finish it off with beeswax, working it in until the saddle horn is slick and smooth.

Punches are used for decorative work on a saddle, and come in varying sizes depending on the item being worked on, for example, a watchband, vest, belt, saddle or boot. End punches provide decorative scalloping on the leather. Slim points out a “carousel”, and the marble slab that sit on his bench, and describes their use.

He discusses his start in saddle making, how he met his wife, Grace, and his activities and duties in the Army during WWII. He relates the story of the President Roosevelt nameplate he created while stationed in Fort Riley, Kansas.

TAPE FOUR, SIDE A:

Mr. Green discusses the two sewing machines, his order book, and the Santa Fe saddle design he created. He also talks about how a saddle is put together, his stitching horse, and a set of eight mauls (hammers) used to make decorative leather projects. Mr. Green shares several stories from his past, in particular, the meeting of a young lady whom he had made a saddle for in 1950. Slim says that the saddle he made for her was the first saddle he has made with the Indian pattern. He discusses the five albums he has that contain pictures of ‘nearly every fancy saddle I made.’

TAPE FOUR, SIDE B:

According to Slim, a good saddle maker must also be a good horseman. A good saddle has to be strong, useable, well made, and comfortable. The saddle must fit the horse and measurements, and photos of the horse are crucial to constructing a saddle. Green has developed his own technique for measuring horses. He states that his business has come from word of mouth, and that he had not advertised at all.

Saddletrees from Mexico are discussed. Green states that “the tree was still wet on it and they built the saddle on it, and it would be just warped.” Green contrasts “mature” leather from cows six or seven years of age with today’s year old cattle with thick hides, but no fibers. Mature hides cost more. Slim says that calves are put into feedlots as soon as they are weaned. This allows the calf to get far real quick, but the hides lose quality. They are thick but don’t have good fibers in them.

TAPE FIVE, SIDE A:

Green states that the saddletree is the foundation of making a saddle. A key element of the saddletree is balance. The saddle must fit the rider, and the horse. A discussion about the different components of a saddle follows. Green demonstrates while he discusses.

Slim’s supplier for trees is the Ritter Tree Company in Anthony, and has been since 1950. The stirrups are attached to the fender, not the saddle. A standard stirrup is usually nineteen inches long. Slim tailors the stirrup length to his customers, and in some cases they are twenty-four inches long. A Mochila is a pouch slung over the horn of a saddle to carry mail.

TAPE FIVE, SIDE B:

Bits come from Kelly Brothers, in El Paso, Texas. Green prefers heavy bits to light ones, since less pull on the reins is required. Headstalls or bridles should also be heavy. He describes an accident where the headstall was too light, and the horse broke loose. The resulting forces on the bit caused the animal to bite part of its tongue off. Following this incident, Slim began using a tie method on the bit, so that if the

horse spooked and broke the headstall, the bit would fall harmlessly out of the mouth without injuring the animal.

He tells of the Indian runners who put copper in their mouths to produce saliva, and feels that copper alloy bits are the best because they prevent dry mouth. Slim speaks about Ben Herman, an Indian who taught U.S. troops how to ride. Herman taught Slim most of what he knows about horses.

Slim recounts his work at Heisers, and how he has always worked on multiple saddles at a time. He displays the photo album of his saddles, and describes the saddle that is in the Gene Autry Museum.

TAPE SIX, SIDE A:

More items in the Gene Autry Museum are described, including a bootjack that he gave to Robert Wagner. Green discusses how he got his nickname "Slim", and his movements around the United States, in particular Colorado and Wyoming.

Green shares that Pop Bettis told him "every time you finish a saddle, you look at it and find something that you wanna change the next time." Pop also told him "when you get a saddle and you say that it's perfect, crawl in a box, you're ready to kick the bucket. You're puttin' yourself on a level with the Almighty."

Green's military time in Fort Riley and in the Philippines is discussed. Slim recalls that he used to go to different military hospitals in the Philippines to work with the soldiers on leather projects. He recalls that one Filipino offered to give him half interest in the shoe making business. He discusses his shop at Tesuque, N.M.

TAPE SIX, SIDE B:

Mr. Green continues his discussion regarding a young boy he met in Tesuque, N.M., and how this boy went to California to work in television. Green says that the boy is now grown and has worked with Billy Graham Crusades as the television director.

Slim discusses his daughter's role as an extra in the movie called Little Cowboys. Leather preparation is again discussed. He demonstrates the use of his tools and makes an oak leaf. He describes the different patterns on his stamping tools, and re-visits the discussion regarding the location of his saddles in the United States.

TAPE SEVEN, SIDE A:

Slim continues the hand-on demonstration of leather tooling, with detailing of the oak leaf. He discusses the origin of his tools, getting many from other people, making some of his own, and modifying others such as old broken dental instruments. He never kept a ledger of his sales, but chose instead to keep photo albums of saddles and other leather products he created. [NOTE: there are long periods of tool work without any discussion.]

TAPE SEVEN, SIDE B:

The demonstration on the oak leaf continues. Slim averaged a saddle a month working on two or three in stages. He has never advertised his business saying the key to his success is telling his customers that he'd done this or that "special" for them. This makes the customer feel good, and promotes "publicity" or work of mouth advertising

He describes his participation in the State's apprenticeship program. Mr. Green would take six or seven boys and teach them how to make saddles. The State would buy the leather, and he would keep the boys for about thirty days, and teach them everything he knew. He says that at the end of the thirty days, they could do just about anything. He would let them make two saddles, which they could turn around and sell. The government paid Slim \$1500 to teach the boys how to make the saddles. Slim also says that saddle making is a changing art. The cheap saddles of today don't last because the leather isn't allowed to dry properly. Consequently, they warp when they do dry. During this discussion, he demonstrates the flower pattern in the leather.

TAPE EIGHT, SIDE A:

Slim has other patterns including Greek Key, Rain Cloud, Taos Lightning, and Forked Lightning. Slim says "a lot of guys making flowers will make a big flower with a leaf on either side called 'cabbage.'" Slim likes it when a person looks at one of his patterns and "sees something here, and the viewer's eyes follow the pattern all the way up."

The interview ends with Slim demonstrating additional work on the design he is cutting into the piece of leather. On the video you can see him chewing on the leather piece he is working on, explaining that the leather is dry. If the leather dries up on you while you're working, it is called 'bony.'

Carving and designing leather is much like an artist creating a painting. When you view a painting, which is flat, the painter uses shadows so that it looks like you can reach right out, and pick the flower. Slim strives to achieve the same effect when carving and designing leather, and thinks of his saddles as functional works of art.

TAPE EIGHT, SIDE B: Blank

TAPE NINE, SIDE A:

The Pony Tracks saddle was originally commissioned by Robert Cohen of Washington, D.C.; a collector of Indian regalia. Mr. Cohen requested some of the designs be put on the saddle.

Several of Slim's own designs were also used as a border for the saddle, and include Indians chasing a buffalo, Indian shields, and eagle feathers on the fenders of the saddle.

A sunburst, setting behind a hill, with the customer's individual brand in the center, was used on the left side of the seat. Raven and turkey feather designs are also used on the saddle.

Slim states that he uses the color blue to represent the turquoise, and red to signify the red clay that Indians would put on their faces.

A total of three "Pony Track" saddles were made. The first one was made for Robert Cohen. The second saddle, with a II in the brand, indicated that it was the second one. This saddle is now in Brownsville, Texas. The third saddle was made for the son of Dick Spencer, editor of the WESTERN HORSEMAN magazine. The saddles were priced at \$5,000, \$7,000, and \$7,500 respectively.

The discussion on the first Pony Track saddle continues with Slim explaining that once, in Santa Fe, he came across an Indian craftsman making peace pipes. According to the craftsman, the thirteen turkey feathers indicate never going home again.

Acrylic dyes are used to color a saddle. The dye is applied, and then sealed in with a lacquer finish. Slim's saddles are made to be ridden, and are not merely show pieces for display use only.

Other symbols used on the saddle include shields, buffalo skulls, snakes, arrows, and a variety of birds. The design size and location on the saddle dictate the placement of the various symbols.