



ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW ABSTRACT

CONSULTANT: R. C. "Punch" Jones

DATE OF BIRTH: 1929 GENDER: Male

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: September 4, 2009

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: NM Farm & Ranch Heritage Museum

INTERVIEWER: Cameron Saffell

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMFRHM

TRANSCRIBED: No

NUMBER OF TAPES: One

ABTRACTOR: Caroline Palmer

DATE ABSTRACTED: September 8, 2009

RECORDING QUALITY (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Jones discusses his sheep and cattle business in Eastern New Mexico.

DATE RANGE: 1900s-2009

ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

TAPE ONE, SIDE A:

“Punch” Jones states that before the Pecos Bridge was built, there was a Mexican man made his living pulling people across the river through the quicksand. It was quite an improvement to get that bridge. Jones’ father bought a place near Vaughn, and they spent one winter up there in a sheepherder wagon and nearly froze. The family moved back to Caprock, but had difficulties getting the burros to cross the bridge. Their only alternative was to tie them to a Model T Ford and drag them across the bridge.

He describes how his father became involved in the sheep business. A severe blizzard in 1913 caught many herders and sheep by surprise and brought losses of sheep and several herders who froze to death. He also tells the story of his father losing all his ewes after a fire. The current family ranch is described.

Poor educational standards prompted the Jones family to move to Roswell. The family would return to the ranch on weekends, and in the summer months. Jones describes his four children and his siblings. His sister, Mary, married Joe Skeen. His brother Dick received various agricultural degrees, specializing in wool and cotton. He worked for the Department of Agriculture teaching international marketing programs in various countries around the world.

Jones discusses the development of the Debouillet sheep. He originally was raising Rambouillet, and although they are big sheep, they do not produce a lot of wool. In the early 1920s his father purchased Merino rams and began a breeding program in an effort to get the wool of the Delaine on the body of a Rambouillet. Although his father only had a seventh grade education, he figured out a breeding system without going to college or talking to anyone about breeding.

There is a brief discussion about the first oil well in Hobbs and the impact that it had on the area ranchers. In the end, most of the ranchers turned the land purchases back to the state.

Although nearly crippled, his father would have the sheep run in front of him, and he would point to the sheep he wanted to keep based on the length of the wool. He felt that he should work on only one trait at a time, such as wool length, and then move on to the next so you do not end up with average product. Jones recalls that his father had developed some “tremendous staple lengths.” He recalls that at one time they had to consider shearing twice a year because the wool mills were having trouble handling the wool because it was too long.

After his father’s death, Jones went back to stressing animal size, uniformity, and density. If there was a lot of Delaine blood, there was a lot of grease in the wool. If there was a lot of Rambouillet blood, the sheep were whiter in color. Jones would separate the dark ewes from the light ewes, put a light ram in with the light ewes, and eventually reached a good uniformity. Density has problems all its own because in order to have density you have to sacrifice staple length. He states that he has continued working on animal size until the last five or six years, and says that size is not the number one issue anymore. He no longer shears close to the eyes, and states that he has lost a little of the fineness or diameter of fiber, and as a result he works on that quite a bit these days. There is a brief discussion about wool fineness.

Jones took over the care of the ranch at age fifteen, after his father’s death. His mother took over the bookkeeping. His father had always kept a tally book, but as long as he could remember his mother had done the bookkeeping. He later incorporated and bought everyone out. He states that it took him a long time to get everybody paid off.

When asked how important school was to his parents, he states that his mother wanted all of the children to go to college and graduate, but she did not get her wish. Each of the children went to college for a little while, but did not graduate.

His father always felt that it was more important to have practical education, and as a result, his father would often take him out of school to take him to cattle sales, wool sales, conventions and such. His father felt that Jones could get more out of three days there than ten days of school; as far as his father was concerned, school took a back seat.

Although his father was strictly a Hereford man, he raised both cattle and sheep, raising bulls and commercial cows.

TAPE ONE, SIDE B:

The discussion continues regarding the cattle his father raised. His father particularly liked Hereford, perhaps due to the fact that there were no other breeds in New Mexico at the time. He had even purchased a herd of registered cows, and always tried to have some quality in them. Jones states that his father would "die if he saw what we had today."

Jones crossed Hereford cattle with Brangus cattle and Red Angus. The result was higher weights, less eye problems, and they live longer. He maintains a fifty-fifty ratio (in animal units) of sheep to cattle at his ranch, but that depends on what the market is doing. He does not know how much longer he can continue to stay in the sheep industry. Predators have always been a problem but he states that he hires a good predator tracker who has helped to keep the coyotes down.

The meat market for lamb is good, but it is difficult to raise them. The wool market is not very good. In the past wool has produced approximately one-third of their sheep income. Today it produces only about 5% of their sheep income. Natural fibers took a hit when synthetics came along, Jones states. During World War II most ranchers lost their labor help. Many changes had to be made to accommodate how ranchers operate and deal with the sheep. He sets feeders out on the range and begins to supplement feed for approximately two or three months. Better feed means better lambs. Ewes must be in good shape for them to produce twin lambs.

Jones describes a typical cycle of work, beginning with putting the rams out with the ewes. Lambs are born toward the end of April and are weaned in October. He sells his lambs through a co-op in Roswell from January to June, and states that this has been good because the rancher will catch the rise and fall of market prices if he sells continually over several months. He must, however, make all of the sheep work coincide with working the cattle. Bulls are put out in early January, which results in fall calving. He prefers a fall calving to spring calving because there is ample water and good feed at that time of year. By September the calf is already weaned and can be easily taken away from the cow.

In addition to sheep and cattle, they grow wheat, which Jones tries to get up by September, and the calves stay on this until the beginning of the year. He states that this yearly pattern has been practiced for decades and that labor has been a factor in changing how things were done after World War II. The cost of feed has always been a big expense, and he tries to match the cost of labor with the cost of feed. Finding labor is extremely difficult. With the current recession putting people out of work, he has seen an increase of people begging for work even though they do not know anything about farming. If they are willing to try, Jones feels that is all he can ask of them, to try their best.

During the Depression he remembers about fifty men being on the ranch. Dad would not let a man walk away that was hungry; he could not afford to pay them. He had them cutting locoweed, breaking rocks in

the roads, anything he could think of to give them something to do. Jones recalls that those men had a lot of pride, a trait that is lacking today. He recalls one man who asked his mother if she had work for him to do because he was hungry. She gave him a job, and the man did the job before he ate anything.

The shearing process is discussed. The shearing crew comes from Missouri. The sheep are all brought in at the same time and put into smaller pastures close to the shearing barn. Each member usually shears between 180 and 240 sheep a day. The shearing crew and equipment is described.

During the 1940s and 1950s bagged wool would go to Roswell to be processed and compressed into bales that contain the wool from four or five other bags. Now the wool is shipped to Pendleton Woolen Mills, where it is scoured and sent to China. In China it is made into cloth, shipped back to Pendleton Mills, and distributed here in the United States.