

**NEW MEXICO  
FARM & RANCH  
HERITAGE  
MUSEUM**

**ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM  
INTERVIEW ABSTRACT**

CONSULTANT: Fred Dixon

DATE OF BIRTH: March 12, 1920 GENDER: Male

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: June 15 and 16, 2003

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Dixon Apple Farm, La Cañada (Peña Blanca), N.M.

INTERVIEWER: Ramona L. Caplan

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM  HSR  OTHER

TRANSCRIBED: Yes: January 4, 2004

NUMBER OF TAPES: Three

ABTRACTOR: Ramona L. Caplan

DATE ABSTRACTED: November 16, 2003

RECORDING QUALITY (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Dixon's 45+-acre orchard in the Jemez Mountains near Cochiti Pueblo produces nationally known dessert apples, unique to New Mexico and grown only at Dixon Apple Farm.

DATE RANGE: 1920 – 2003

## **ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):**

### **TAPE ONE, SIDE A:**

The consultant explains the differences between his trademarked and patented dessert apples (Champagne and Sparkling Burgundy varieties) and falsely promoted "Dixon Apples." His are well known in New Mexico, and the farm is the only place in the world where they are raised. He could make money selling tree-wood, but likes having something no one else has. He contrasts his land and irrigation water quality with other areas along the Rio Grande. He states it is the only place he knows where irrigation water can be sprayed on fruit blossoms to harvest without discoloring the apples.

Contrasts his apples with others. New Mexico growers would do well if they raised quality fruit; leave it on the tree until it becomes "dessert quality" and take care of it instead of "pushing junk fruit" on the public. They cannot raise enough to meet customers demand and are the envy of every fruit grower. They no longer ship any product. Customers come to farm at harvest over two or three weekends. No commercial buyers are permitted, only families and individuals. Not sold to grocery stores.

Reviews history of property. Former ranch owner James Young brought the Dixons there from Colorado in 1944. Had a partnership for twenty-one years, with Dixons getting half the ranch if successful. Discusses Young's efforts to donate 10,060-acre ranch to various entities (for tax reasons); finally deeded to University of New Mexico. Dixons now lease the property.

Wife, Faye, home-schooled their sons up until they went to McCurdy Mission High School and New Mexico State. Granddaughter Becky also home-schools her kids. Talks about son Rich and her daughter Becky and how Becky eventually joined him at the apple farm about 1986. Taught her everything about apples.

Reviews early life and initial contacts with Young, who had the place as a summer home and knew nothing about raising apples. Dixons having financial troubles, were invited down to consider moving there. Describes the poor condition of farm and wormy apples at the time.

Fred returned to Colorado, but soon received a letter offering \$100/month to manage the site and orchard. Talks more about the condition of house, no telephone except Forest Service line to Española/Jemez, and equipment they had. Recalls initial Indian workers, early conflicts, and eventual good relations with them as workers and employees.

Describes that he did the most work of anyone until emphysema and arthritis got too bad. Still works, but uses hydraulic equipment. Believes that one man does the work of six working with ladders. It is his opinion that one man does the work of six on the ground with ladders. Says that pruning is the heart of the whole operation; start after November and work through until April.

Describes early production being more than gift businesses could sell. Fruit brokers did not want "junk fruit from New Mexico." He talks about extent of orchards around New Mexico. Made a deal with a California broker with money-back guarantee. Never took a penny from the government while he ran the farm, since 1944.

Talks about the University of New Mexico. Holds summer classes there (several subjects, not including farming), and owns the land and buildings. Emphasizes that he owns the trees and patents. Becky has agreed not to sell. Describes the chaos at the apple shed during harvest time.

### **TAPE ONE, SIDE B:**

[Everyone gets a sample apple.]

The consultant tells the story of betting several university professors \$10,000 that daughter Becky knew more about raising apples than any grower or professor. Got letters from all over. Associated Press published an article.

He talks about previous arrangement selling mail order, shipping to California. Did not want to sell in New Mexico with other junk apples. Discusses Furr's Foods [grocery stores] wanting to buy his apples at \$50/box instead of the going rate of \$4. Hasn't shipped to California in at least ten years. Can't pick fast enough and needs a night crew just to keep up with the crowds. Last year [2002] the whole crop sold in a week and a half.

Other New Mexico apples sell in stores about a month before Dixon opens, usually about September 20th-25th. He uses modern equipment, and a stainless steel cider plant. Packs into half-bushel bags (22-26 pounds) for \$10, bushel boxes for \$20. He hasn't raised price in eight years. Gets folks coming from Texas, Colorado, and Oklahoma, as well as phone requests to hold apples, however he doesn't hold for anyone. Last year was the first time Fred missed a harvest in fifteen years, due to emphysema. The consultant splits time with a place in Idaho where his younger son farms. He still overdoes things when he is here, and wants to be out on the tractor. Briefly describes his family and 47-year marriage.

Goes into more detail about the apples he grows. They are not hybrids, but local wild varieties. Mature seeds do not grow back as the same apple, so they have to graft. He belongs to the Grower Fruit Tree Association (GFTA), which was so impressed with wild apples Fred sent, they wanted him to patent. Distinguishes between Champagne and other varieties.

The consultant talks about markets, prices, and making a living. Offers details about sprays he uses versus others. Integrity is gone, he says, and people do anything for a dollar.

Reviews varieties they grew in Colorado and the trees on farm when they moved to New Mexico. Briefly talks about other farmers and Spanish ranchers in area. Fruit never freezes here, but has been hailed out completely. Always cool at night, hot in daytime; fruit loves it. Temperatures are great for tomatoes, peaches, and cherries. Could sell Champagne trees for \$100, but won't do it; would break his patent. Numerous articles are written every year about Dixon's apples, including the New Mexico article on Becky (1966) located in the file. Originally he did not want Becky there. Was heartbroken since Faye died; now just wants to work and drive a tractor.

### **TAPE TWO, SIDE A:**

Talks about family education and how the ranch is his church. Goes into some detail about how Faye died at age 65 after an Albuquerque hospital gave her a shot with a dirty needle.

Discusses how sometimes it feels like being foreigners in the community among the Spanish and Indians. Only one Anglo family when they arrived. Eventually were welcomed. The land used to be a dude ranch, now part of UNM. People operate apple orchards on the side, not full-time.

Offers more details about managing orchard trees. Trees must be no taller than a ten-foot ladder. Individually prune each tree, do brush and weed control, check irrigation. Original plantings were 30x30; now much closer, about 12x18. All drip irrigation. Jim Mullane put in micro-sprinklers. Talks about the lack of snow, and alternative water sources.

Describes Jim and Becky's relationship and problems at ranch he has helped solve (particularly elk) and offers more details about the orchard ranch of forty-seven acres. Hires enough help to fill forty ladders. Uses families from local pueblos and towns. Describes how they used to employ and pay Mexicans [Braceros?]. Good workers. No minimum wage, it was all piece work. Today they are required to pay \$5.25/hour; workers made more doing piece work, offered more incentive.

Used to have beef and milk cows, chickens, rabbits, garden, bought staples in town. Jim had to sell cows in drought. Becky canned until two years ago when the garden and lawn burned up (went dry). Waiting on garden again until drought ends.

The consultant talks about the national apple market. Believes secret is having quality product and welcoming customers. Young used to cut apples and give little bites to customers; it embarrassed Fred and Faye. Could sell 45-50 acres of Champagne apples alone.

Original lease with UNM expired. UNM originally wanted Becky to sign 25-year lease, but she refused. They later changed their mind, signed a lease in perpetuity. Becky and Jim have more trouble with UNM than Fred did. Things were different when Tom Popejoy was president.

### **TAPE TWO, SIDE B:**

Home school is a blessing; used to take kids to Santa Fe Christian school, 80 miles a day. Once a week, former schoolmates still meet and go together on field trip. Sometimes they come here. Becky's dad built a dollhouse for kids, has a trampoline. Fred plans to stick around to see great-grandkids. Spends two months each in Idaho and New Mexico.

### **TAPE THREE, SIDE A:**

Fred expected Becky to stay six or eight weeks in the beginning. He did not think she could take it. It is a lonesome place unless you love it, and few people do.

The consultant talks about doing his own housework and cooking meals for himself and family. Also does it in Idaho. Numbers off his descendants. He states that he is closest to Becky. Wouldn't let her date anyone working for him. She dated all sorts of guys, but wouldn't marry anyone who wasn't interested in the ranch. Had known and disliked Jim for a couple of years before they fell in love. Jim and Fred get along well.

He talks about family life with his kids. Tells about kids' familiarity with Jemez Mountain, experiences riding. He shares the story of how they got lost one time, had to turn horses loose to follow them home. Boys never smoked or drank and were no problem.

Got things turned around and was making money in early 1950s. Talks about dwarfing rootstock and how long it takes trees to reach profitable production. Offers opinions about minimum wage and FDR's policies.

Has over one hundred rose bushes at the ranch, noted for them. Gets fresh flowers every day. Charlotte Armstrong is the best rose for aroma.

Talks more about how drought could wipe you out, but does not want government help. If he can't make it on his own, then should do something else. Briefly recounts transportation in the area. More information is given about laborers and the foreman. Describes how Young got property fenced (before he arrived) in a cooperative arrangement with government agencies.

Discusses sources for electric power over the years. Current power line from Cochiti Pueblo is not enough to run packing shed. Has new, big electric generator to run deep-well pump.

He talks about the causes of his emphysema (smoking fifty years ago, dust, and chemicals). More details about chemical sprays Jim uses today and methods of application (including sticky traps).

### **TAPE THREE, SIDE B:**

Started doing chores when he was 4 or 5 years old. His kids started driving tractors when 6. Trust kids, they'll respond. Talks about sons, grandkids interest in riding the rodeo. Kids never wanted to prune, move pipe, or trap gophers, but loved riding horses, cattle, and tractor work.

Used medicinal turpentine. Had a garden, raised their own meat (smoked, canned, hamburgers put in lard), kept eggs in egg glass. Faye made cottage cheese and churned butter.

Did not belong to any associations in Colorado. Belonged to N.M. Fruit Growers and was vice-president. For years they wanted him to be president, but they wanted to lobby for government help, and he's not that kind of person.

A man's footprints in his own orchard or fields are the best fertilizer or chemical you can get. You don't need a guy reading a book telling you how to raise apples. Makes point that he does not sell apples anywhere in New Mexico, except here. Gets lots of media coverage every year.