

**NEW MEXICO  
FARM & RANCH  
HERITAGE  
MUSEUM**

**ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM  
INTERVIEW ABSTRACT**

CONSULTANT: Janice Gnatkowski

DATE OF BIRTH: April 15, 1924 GENDER: Female

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: November 16, 2001; January 4, 2002

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Lincoln County Courthouse, Carrizozo, N.M.

INTERVIEWER: Jane O'Cain

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM X OTHER \_\_\_\_\_

TRANSCRIBED: Yes: April 30, 2002

NUMBER OF TAPES: Three

ABTRACTOR: Sheila Klug

DATE ABSTRACTED: June 25, 2002

QUALITY OF RECORDING (SPECIFY): A portion of the November 16 interview is missing due to a problem with the tape recorder. Sound quality is good, however.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: After a brief discussion of how her forebears came to New Mexico, the interview covers the consultant's life on the ranch from her early childhood to the present.

DATE RANGE: 1930-2002

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

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

The consultant's father owned a Chevrolet-Buick agency in Roswell until the Depression hit. Her father collected the debts that were owed the business by taking any animal offered in payment. He then leased land and went into the ranching business.

Mrs. Gnatkowski described how her family came to New Mexico by covered wagon. Her paternal grandfather was with the railroad and later became a policeman in Roswell. Her mother's family came from Tennessee, via Texas, and into New Mexico trying to help a family member with severe allergies. The consultant's mother was born in Weed in 1891; her father was born in Roswell, but she is uncertain about the date.

The consultant spoke briefly about the Oliver Lee case (the murder of Albert Fountain) and related that the people at that time were very afraid of Oliver Lee. The consultant's grandfather was on the grand jury in the Oliver Lee case, as was the father of Bill Mauldin, the cartoonist.

The consultant lived in Roswell as a small child until her parents leased a ranch at Lovington and then at Olive. When the people from whom they were leasing wanted their ranch back, her parents bought a place in Lincoln County (Ancho). After completing high school in Carrizozo, the consultant attended Texas State Women's College.

Mrs. Gnatkowski described her childhood on the ranch. An only child, her best friend was her Shetland pony. She loved living on the ranch and spent most of her free time helping her father at the ranch. She stated that when she married she did not know how to cook because she spent so little time in the house with her mother.

Talk then turned to the terrible drought in the 1930s. There was one year where they had to trail their cattle to their neighbor's ranch because he had gotten some rain. Basically, though, her parents did not talk about problems in front of her, so she is not really aware of how severe their financial problems were.

The tape ends prematurely at this point.

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

The first portion of this side of the tape is blank.

Talk about water resources resumed. The consultant stated that the ranch at Ancho had several wells, and they have drilled several more. In addition, her father replaced all the fences there.

For many years they had about 900 head of sheep in addition to the cattle. Since the two breeds do not eat the same things they can be on the same land.

The consultant related an amusing story to illustrate her father's temper. One time his old car quit on him and he could not get it restarted. He took a tire iron and broke out all the windows, then walked home. The next day he returned to find that the electrical system had shorted out and the car was burned.

Talk returned to the problems with raising sheep. That industry is now nonexistent. In 1972 the price got down to fifteen cents a pound, so the consultant and two neighbors borrowed some money and started the "Sheep to Shawl" program, which ran at the state fair. This ran in conjunction with the weaving guild in Albuquerque, Las Arañas, and continued for about twenty years. It was very successful. Mrs. Gnatkowski described in detail how it worked.

The consultant briefly talked about her school days in Ancho and Carrizozo. Her school bus ride to Carrizozo was about ninety miles round trip. She stated she got used to it and most of the time completed her homework on the trip.

She described how she met her husband during World War II. He was an engineer on the plane piloted by her best friend's husband. After she graduated from college, she married her husband in 1946 and went to Michigan for him to complete his Masters in chemical engineering. In the early 1950s her father told her he was going to sell the ranch unless she wanted it. She could not bear the thought of losing it, so she, her husband, and their son came back to the ranch.

Her father had bought the ranch from the bank, which had had to foreclose on the owner, a family named Fambrough. Later on over the years they added to the ranch by buying from homesteaders who could not make it on the allotments they were given. She felt that many of these homesteaders did not realize what they were getting into and in addition to their ranches being too small, often there was no water on them. Some of them had to buy water in Ancho for a nickel a barrel.

Mrs. Gnatkowski reported that the family did not have much cash but she never felt deprived. Her mother made over hand-me-downs, they always had plenty of meat, and her parents had a very large vegetable garden. Although some years they did fairly well, she feels that it is not possible to make money ranching these days. Both of her boys are on the ranch but also have full-time jobs.

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

The consultant remembers having coal oil lamps as a child but cannot remember when they got electricity. Her father was on the first REA board.

She described their house in Ancho. Built in 1910, it had four rooms with a big fireplace that opened into the four rooms. This, plus a wood-burning stove in the kitchen, was their only source of heat. The house had walls, which were eighteen inches thick, so it was very warm. Since one pasture was in the national forest, they had all the firewood they needed.

The consultant went on to describe their only outbuilding, a two-story barn made out of hand-hewn logs.

At one time her family had seven milk cows. They had a cream separator and poured the cream into five-gallon cans. When the cans were full, they were taken to the railroad in Ancho and sent to whoever was giving the best price for cream. It might take a week to fill the five-gallon can and even in summer this was not refrigerated. She relates how several years later the government tested the cows for tuberculosis and several were positive.

She also refers to the "little white book" she wrote under the pseudonym of Nancy Cook. The book is titled *Three Squares*. She states she used a penname because of some of the things she said about her neighbors.

The extra milk or whey was given to the animals on the place: pigs, chickens, dogs, and cats. In addition to the large vegetable garden they had fruit trees, including apples, pears and apricots.

The family's brand was the Lazy H 6. The consultant described the brand as an "H" on its side with a backward "J" to create the "6." The consultant's father used a stamp rather than a running iron. Running irons were used only for touching up missing parts of the brand.

The consultant described a typical year on the ranch. Lambing began in May when the danger of deep snows was past. Usually there would be twenty-five or thirty dogie lambs to be raised. Since there were about 900 ewes, this was considered to be a good ratio.

Meanwhile, calving had started in April, and they were left strictly alone. The family did all their vet work themselves because the animal's worth would not pay for the vet. The consultant remembers that the family usually was in debt.

The next big job on the ranch was branding, and the lambs needed to have their tails docked. They would trade labor with their neighbors. Their closest neighbors were the Lovelaces, the Kennedys, and the Bogles.

They used to de-worm the sheep but did not do it to the cattle until recently. Talk then turned to the requirement to give medicines to the animals and how the animals are moved from the ranch to the feed farms and then to the slaughterhouse. Every step along the way someone takes a cut so the rancher is getting very little money for his efforts.

They have been raising Angus cattle for forty or fifty years because they are "thrifter." They're born smaller, making it easier for the cows, but they gain faster.

They have several wells on the ranch, but they are not big producing wells so they have to be careful not to waste water. They do not have any small streams running through the property, as do some of their neighbors. Their wells are all connected so if one breaks down they can force water to that area.

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

After the branding was done time was spent checking water, looking for coyotes, and seeing that everything is all right.

In October they would contract the lambs and calves and set a date for shipping. The neighbors would come in to help round up the cows.

Sheep were sheared in April. Mrs. Gnatkowski feels sheep are twice the work of cows, but they produce two crops: wool and lambs. The family did not shear the lambs but had a hired crew. Usually the crew came from Texas, but the consultant described the Australian crew they hired one year. She described their technique, which was considerably different from the Texans'.

She described a contest at the state fair one year where three-person crews sheared the sheep by hand. The consultant was on a crew of all women, where one sheared the sheep and the other two spun the wool into yarn and wove a shawl. They won.

The consultant describes the fence that her dad made around the ranch. She stated her father would rather fence than anything else. She described the materials used and which was better for which purpose.

The consultant said they usually had a hired hand. She does not remember every having a problem finding people and describes the payment arrangement. Now, though, she and her husband cannot afford a hired hand.

She described in some detail how the cows and sheep were contracted and marketed. She and her parents would trail the cattle the eleven miles to the railroad in Ancho, an activity she loved. The sheep were picked up at the ranch by trucks. They tried to get the animals off the ranch before the first of November, when they might get a deep snow. She described the supplemental feeding of cow cake, which starts after the first of the year. They contract for these cow cakes (also called cow cubes), which are very expensive (\$180.00 a ton). She described how they found and fed the cattle hay when they had a deep snow. For a time her father grew alfalfa on his farm near Tularosa. But after that was sold they had to buy their hay. They could not grow their own because there was never enough rain and the draws were full of cactus, making mowing an impossibility.

The consultant describes ranchers as the “biggest gamblers on earth” because they are at the total mercy of the market. She made a statement that after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, they were unable to sell their calves. The market went totally flat. Even when the meat supply on hand is depleted the government could go to Australia and buy what they need. She feels the government gives ranchers no support at all.

Another problem with a world market, she feels, is that another country can load 100,000 lambs on a boat, bring them to Mexico, put them on a ranch for the required number of days and then bring them into the United States under NAFTA.

Talk once more turned to the weather and the various droughts over the years. When it does come, the rain is very erratic so that somebody's in a drought all the time.

The consultant described how they lost thirty heifers that got into locoweed. She described their behavior after they found the locoweed.

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

The consultant describes how sheep can die in a snowstorm. This was not a problem for the Gnatkowskis, however. They had more problems with predators, such as coyotes, eagles, and mountain lions. One year they lost 260 lambs to one coyote. They killed a lot of coyotes before they got the one causing all the trouble. He would kill a lamb, eat the heart and liver, and then go and kill another lamb. She also described the methods mountain lions used to kill lambs. She described the special fences they built to outsmart coyotes.

The Herefords her father raised sometimes had pink eye, which she called “cancer eye.” She described how they burned the affected eye out with a hot iron. Angus and black whiteface cattle do not seem as prone to this problem.

The consultant said all but one forest ranger they've dealt with have been nice, helpful men, though now they have so much paperwork they do not come to the ranch as often. She also has had good relations with the BLM and the State of New Mexico, from whom they also lease land.

One of her sons is a county agent in addition to working on the ranch. The consultant described some of his duties as a county agent. Her other son is a minister in Capitan.

The consultant remembers her grandmother making soap. The family did not make any wine, but only things like apple juice and apple butter. Mrs. Gnatkowski's mother did not use any plants for medicinal purposes, but her grandmother administered sulfur and molasses every spring to the point where the consultant learned to like it!

Her parents went into town for groceries infrequently. All they had to buy to supplement their cattle and garden produce were things like flour and sugar.

The consultant said that holidays were celebrated much like they are today except they made their own gifts. Birthday and similar celebrations meant having some of the neighbors in for a meal. Her mother made about five gallons of candy every year, and the consultant's children would give some to each of their teachers. The candy included fudge, fours, Kentucky colonels, peanut brittle, and toffee. She describes what fours and Kentucky colonels are.

She said her parents were too busy to be involved with too many leisure activities. There was an occasional dance at the country club, and they visited the neighbors a lot. Visiting with the neighbors is fast disappearing. The consultant said there's little time for this. Even though machinery has freed them from a lot of work they have to spend more time fixing the machines.

Her parents had a battery-operated radio at the ranch. Due to its having low batteries, World War II had been over three days before they knew about it. They did not get a newspaper because the news was a week old by the time they got it. They did subscribe to magazines, however.

Although the consultant had friends at school who came to the ranch for a visit, she did not stay in town with them. She feels the children loved to come to the ranch because there were horses they could ride to roam all over the country.

Her parents were not involved in politics, though her father was involved with the REA, and her husband was on the REA board for thirty-five years.

Although she was very involved in the Sheep to Shawl program, she was not involved in the Cattle Growers Association because she did not think she and her husband could contribute to the cow industry and also because she preferred the sheep.

Her best memories of growing up on the ranch are horseback riding and the animals, plus the freedom to explore.

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

As for the hardship of ranch life, her parents never talked about that in front of her, so she did not realize how difficult things were sometimes. She described the various ways in which she helped her father: checking cattle, tying wires on the fence line, and milking cows.

She feels the biggest impact on ranching is government control and the fact that everything has gotten harder and more complicated. Weather is also a factor. Now there's a drought, but she can remember when they would get two to three feet of snow. On the other hand, she feels life on the ranch is much easier now, due to things like automatic washers and dryers.

She feels the future for ranching does not look good. Ranchers are leaving the land and being replaced by dudes. She also blames environmentalists for their problems and feels that environmentalists are trying to get livestock off the land. Although both of her sons came back to the ranch, she is not sure about the next generation.