



ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
INTERVIEW ABSTRACT

CONSULTANT: Felicia Thal

DATE OF BIRTH: April 18, 1928 SEX: Female

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: November 14, 1996

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Hilton Hotel, Las Cruces, New Mexico

INTERVIEWER: Jane O'Cain

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM__X__OTHER_____

TRANSCRIBED: Yes: July 15, 1997

NUMBER OF TAPES: Two

ABTRACTOR: Ann Macbeth

DATE ABSTRATED: January 16, 2001

QUALITY OF RECORDING (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: A brief summary of Thal's personal history. Primary focus of the interview is on her part in the founding of the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum [hereafter Museum].

DATE RANGE: 1928 -1996

ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

TAPE ONE, SIDE A:

Jane O’Cain interviewed Felicia Thal at the Hilton Hotel in Las Cruces, New Mexico on November 14, 1996. Thal lives on the eastern slopes, twenty miles northeast of Las Vegas, New Mexico. She is a member of the Museum board, was chairman the first three years of board existence, and has been involved in founding the Museum since 1986. Thal was reluctant to serve sequential terms because she felt it time to have new people involved. There has been expression of the sentiment of keeping all first board members involved until completion of the project, but Thal does not think it is the right thing to do. In order to strengthen the commitment to the museum; it is important to involve more people, she says.

Felicia Thal was born and raised in Durban, South Africa. Both she and her husband Alan, graduated from the University of Cape Town in December of 1949, and married immediately afterward. After several weeks travel in Europe, the newlyweds arrived in New York in January of 1950 for Alan to take up an internship of pathology at Cornell University in New York. Felicia attended graduate school at Columbia University.

The Thals moved to Baltimore where Alan started a surgical career and Felicia attended graduate school at Johns Hopkins. A year later they moved to the University of Minnesota where Alan finished a residency in surgery, and Felicia again attended graduate school studying social and intellectual history. While at Columbia University, she studied with Jacques Barzos. She met another former student of Barzos at Wayne University in Detroit, and worked with him. She was particularly interested in the philosophy of education and taught briefly at Wayne. Teaching was not her primary interest—learning and study were. Large research space in the Museum was planned because of her ideals.

From Detroit, the Thals moved to Kansas City where they began their farming/agricultural endeavors. They bought a small farm because Alan had once been an enthusiastic horseman in South Africa and this was the first opportunity to rekindle the interest and keep three horses. They consulted a county agent to investigate putting cattle on the property. Their first effort was to purchase twenty steers and sell them in the fall. The next operation involved starting a herd of Hereford cattle.

After seven years in Kansas, the Thals decided to “go ranching.” They looked for an area to buy property. Their exposure to agriculture was mostly secondhand and through the excellent but general education system in the British Empire. However, Alan’s grandparents had been sheep farmers in the eastern province of the Cape.

The three Thal children have become professionals—the daughter a physician, older son is an attorney, and second son is a veterinarian. They were involved in the ranching operation from the beginning.

Felicia Thal worked closely with New Mexico State University [hereafter NMSU], she received the outstanding leadership award in 1984. She was selected as Cattleman of the Year in 1992. She served as chair of the general advisory council to the college of agriculture [NMSU], and as the county chairman (Mora County) of New Mexico Cattle Growers Association. She thinks the support of other organizations to the Museum project has been minimal, but with the creation of a building, the base of appreciation and support is broadening. She says to build a museum requires a dream and perseverance.

Thal thinks the bond among the board members was that they could dream and imagine a finished product. She states that she is intellectually oriented, she looks for reasons, and she looks for historical beginnings.

She resigned from the board of directors of the New Farm and Ranch Heritage Institute [later Foundation] in ’88 or ’89 because of disagreements with Dr. Bill Stephens and her new duties for New Mexico Cattle Growers. In 1992, she was asked by Governor Bruce King to serve on the newly formed Museum board. At the first meeting of the Museum board meeting in 1993 held at the office of Cultural Affairs, she was chosen to chair the group.

TAPE ONE, SIDE B:

Thal received one of the original invitations to attend a meeting of people interested in founding a museum in February of 1987 from Dr. Bill Stephens. A group of over one hundred people involved with New Mexico agriculture and agricultural industry were invited. Thal was at that time chairman of research and improvement for New Mexico Cattle Growers. At this first meeting, Thal was appointed to a small nucleus group of five or six from within the original

board of the Heritage Institute that was comprised of about fifteen or sixteen members. One of the first efforts was to seek support from agriculture industry. Widespread interest was good, but very few gave money.

The first phase of development lasted from 1987 until 1991, when the Museum project was placed under the State of New Mexico Office of Cultural Affairs. During that time, New Mexico Cattle Growers contributed \$2500, the Farm Bureau did not contribute, and a membership drive provided some \$25 per person fees.

Governor Bruce King appointed the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum board in 1992. The legislature appropriated \$3600 for the Museum, but matching funds had been designated at a two-to-one match, requiring that \$76,000 had to be raised. All the members present were saying, "We're finished," at which point Felicia Thal rallied the group by submitting a \$1000 personal check—four others duplicated her gift to raise \$5000 and create a turning point.

Tom McCalmont was hired as first director of the Museum. A primary function, at that time, was to act as liaison between the board and legislature. Location of the museum was a major effort and controversy. The board looked at the Ruidoso, Ft. Stanton and the Las Cruces areas. Thal argued for Las Cruces because of the close proximity to New Mexico State University's College of Agriculture and Home Economics.

Many hours were spent in attempts to create and realize the mission of the Museum. The abstractness was a problem, the non-materialization of their efforts were tiring and boring but a necessary part of the process. The new board brought in money for architectural design, and a program committee was formed. Finally ideas were set down and hammered into place. Dekker Design Collaborative Southwest was selected as architect on a point system to design the Museum. The board and industry were not represented on the selection committee. The decision was reversed half a day later.

A lawsuit was filed, the governor appointed a second review committee. Because of adverse publicity a third committee, to remove some of the previous members, was chosen. The board decided to be represented by two members at each meeting. Thal mandated, at the first meeting, that all meetings were to be conducted in a manner that fulfills every legal requirement in the process of selecting an architect.

TAPE TWO, SIDE A

In order to keep the ball rolling, Mrs. Thal attended every single meeting of this committee and became friends with several architects of the state. The bad publicity made it more difficult and slowed down the process. If Governor King had not been a strong supporter, the project would have failed.

Felicia Thal says that funding is an ongoing problem. She is a stern taskmaster by driving, pushing, and shoving. On the day of the interview, she had attended a board meeting and insisted upon a major legislative effort for the first of the new year, just six weeks away.

Board members worked for support from their various locales. The people of Doña Ana county and Las Cruces were not especially supportive of the Museum project. The battle for funding continues—and the board has bonded to the point of being like a family.

The decision to relocate the Museum to the site a mile and a half east of the NMSU brought anxious thoughts. But the complex situation was resolved and construction began. During the November 1996 meeting the board set Opening Day for the Museum for March 20, 1997—Agriculture Awareness Day

As late as January 1995, Governor Johnson considered moving the project out from under the umbrella of the Office of Cultural Affairs. Mrs. Thal believes no one is ever safe from legislative happenings, a reason to maintain strong, powerful board members. The big ranchers need to be included.

Felicia Thal feels the most important mission of the Museum is education, as a depository for the collection of memorabilia, and history of the agricultural industry of New Mexico. The increasingly urbanized society needs to learn how food is grown and produced.

When asked about resolution of differences amongst the board, Thal said it was the responsibility of the chair. Different experiences represent different strengths—there must be cooperation between both the Foundation and the Museum boards.

That feels many people have made notable contributions to the project but care should be used in recognizing individuals. Funding remains the biggest challenge. With adequate funding, anything is possible—the board is not short on ideas.

TAPE TWO, SIDE B:

Support of industry necessitates the participation of strong people from industry who are dedicated to the idea of the Museum. There has to be cooperation between board and director, but neither should rule the other.

Dreams of the future include busloads of kids and overwhelming numbers of tourists gasping with delight at what they see of a living farm, a true representation of the diversity of agriculture.