

**NEW MEXICO  
FARM & RANCH  
HERITAGE  
MUSEUM**

**ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM  
INTERVIEW ABSTRACT**

CONSULTANT: Virginia Newberry Taylor

DATE OF BIRTH: October 9, 1921 GENDER: Female

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: December 7, 1999 & January 4, 2000

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Consultant's home in Las Cruces, N.M.

INTERVIEWER: Ron Nelson

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM

TRANSCRIBED: January 14, 2000

NUMBER OF TAPES: Two

ABTRACTOR: Ron Nelson

DATE ABSTRACTED: February 4, 2000

QUALITY OF RECORDING (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Taylor discusses how her father, John W. Newberry, came to New Mexico Territory in the early 1900's and his acquisition of land in the Mesilla Valley prior to the completion of the Elephant Butte Dam, the acquisition of "surplus" U.S. Army mules and a wagon following Poncho Villa's raid on Columbus, New Mexico in 1916. She discusses John W. Newberry in detail including farming endeavors, awards and accomplishments, and role in establishing the Southwestern Irrigated Cotton Growers Association, his role in church activities and in family and community social life.

DATE RANGE: 1911-1975

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

**TAPE ONE, SIDE A:** (December 7, 1999)

Taylor's father, John W. Newberry, was one of the many young men from the Appalachian area of east Tennessee who left their homes in search of a better life. He traveled all over the world as a Merchant Marine, and came to New Mexico in the early 1900s. He loved farming, and knowing that Elephant Butte Dam would be built in the future prompted him to purchase land in the area. His first land purchase was in 1911, with more land added in 1912. He did not actually begin farming until 1917. He purchased eighty-five acres from the original Miscas tract of land, then owned by Charles Hosmer.

Once the land was purchased, he contracted out to clear the land of mesquite and put in irrigation ditches. He had no tools, so he travelled to Columbus, N.M. and purchased a team of mules and a wagon from the army. It was right after the famous Pancho Villa raid incidents. He drove them home by the light of the moon, using Picacho Peak and the Organ Mountains as guides back to his property.

In May of 1917 he married Rachel Ellen Simpson, the daughter of a pioneer Texas couple. She arrived by train, and they were married in the old Park Hotel in Las Cruces. He had built a tarpaper shack for himself, but immediately began making adobes to build their first little house. The home still stands although it has been added to many times since it was first built. He planted his first crops of alfalfa, and in 1921 he planted some seedling pecan trees. He grafted them from stock he got from the college. Grafting was considered experimental at that time. He planted the paper-shell pecan trees along the ditches so that he could still get income from the alfalfa and cotton he planted.

Taylor accompanied her father on many of his visits to work with Dr. Fabian Garcia and still has letters written by Dr. Garcia. Her father experimented with other kinds of crops also, such as peach trees and seedling apple trees, for which he was awarded the Luther Burbank Medal. Growing Mexican June corn was one of his favorite hobbies and he won awards for some of the samples that were sent to the Chicago World's Fair. He was one of the original members of the New Mexico Crop Improvement Association, as well as served as president for many years, and continued to work on improving the crops. He was on the board of Southwest Irrigated Cotton Growers. He started a co-op gin in Fairacres, N.M. and served as president of the organization for many years.

During Taylor's education at NMSU, then known as New Mexico A&M, she lived at home and studied Home Economics. She graduated in 1941.

During the development years of the farm there were sufficient Hispanics living in Picacho area who were very good workers. Taylor recalls that they were paid well. One man, Elias, worked for her father for twenty-five years. "We loved him dearly", says Taylor. She is still in contact with members of Elias' family.

In the late 1940s or early 1950s, her father finally bought a machine, a Ford tractor. Taylor does not remember when electricity came, but she recalls when they got the telephone very well. Her father developed mammoth peaches in the early 1920s, with some weighing as large as a pound. He used the manure from his horse lot, and kept his soil in good condition all the time. He rotated crops so that he could take advantage of the nutrients needed in the soil for each different crop.

The first drought they felt on the farm was in 1950, the year they drilled an irrigation well to supplement irrigation water from the Rio Grande River.

**TAPE ONE, SIDE B:** Blank

**TAPE ONE, SIDE A:** (January 4, 2000)

Taylor's grandfather was a Tennessee farmer and he was born on a small tobacco farm. He loved to see things grow. He went to school for two years at Tusculum College, which was supported by McCormick Harvester Co. located in Greenville, Tennessee.

Her father leveled the land with the team of mules he got from Columbus, NM, from the army. He used the wagon and hand labor to grub out the mesquite. Originally he acquired 28.5 acres, added another fifteen acres, and continued to add acreage until he reached a total of approximately forty-eight acres on this side of Shalam Colony Trail. His first crop was alfalfa and he was surprised at how much he could produce. He went on to experiment with pinto beans, but encountered insect problems. Field corn was one of his great loves, and he grew it early on to feed his stock. He also grew cantaloupe, cabbage, sweet potatoes, and then finally cotton. He diversified his crops. There was always a cow and pigs on the farm. The family rarely had beef on the table, mostly pork. The farm was self-sustaining.

An adobe barn was built in 1917. The adobes were made on the property, *vigas* for their home were harvested from trees along the river, and the *latigos* were made of the brush from those trees. Taylor's father parked his Model A car in the original barn. The barn is now the home of the Taylors. Feed was kept in the room which now serves as their bedroom. The Taylors added on to the original barn, which was in great shape. The original roof was made of twelve inches of mud with pumice stone on top.

When the pecan trees started bearing, they harvested the pecans using long sticks to knock the nuts off the trees, which would then fall onto tarps on the ground. They were then gathered up by hand. Some of these trees are now seventy-five years old.

The irrigating was always at night, so they always had to prepare the kerosene lanterns. Irrigating would sometimes take up to two days, and the water always had to be checked for squirrel holes. New dikes often had to be made.

The crops were mainly marketed in El Paso. The seed corn went to El Paso and Phoenix. Taylor's father had such a good name that people would write and place orders for his seed corn. When there was ripe fruit on the trees they were taken to Las Cruces to sell. Eggs were taken to town and either sold or traded for groceries.

Laborers from the Picacho area were plentiful, and labor costs were commensurate with the price of the product. Her father had land at Chamberino which was farmed by a tenant farmer, and a farm north on Shalem Colony Trail that was farmed by a tenant farmer. Another farm on Fairacres Road was also farmed by a tenant farmer. Her father sold most of those farms in the 1950s, when water was in short supply. As he grew older, it became harder to manage the situation.

Taylor is happy to say that they never participated in any of the Federal programs of the 1930s. When Social Security came in, her parents were given a monthly stipend, which they hadn't really contributed to. They always called it their relief checks.

When there was a profit, the members of The Southwest Irrigated Cotton Growers Association received their share of the profit. It was a co-op with a manager who was very well paid. The manager saw that the cotton and cotton seed were sold.

Her parents were teetotalers, but there was always a lot of hard cider. They made apple cider vinegar, which they sold. In early years, her mother made butter and that was also sold.

Fairacres was a small community. There were picnics on Easter, and Christmas festivities that included the village of Old Picacho. All the children got stockings. Her father loved to play cards, especially bridge. They would go fishing in the drain canals or down in the river, and there were community fish fries. On holidays they would often go back to Texas to see her mother's family, and they made a few trips to Tennessee to see the old homestead where her father came from.

Taylor attended school in Fairacres through the eighth grade, after which she attended Las Cruces High School for four years. She was double promoted, so she graduated from high school when she was fifteen. She graduated from college at nineteen, and was married a week after her college graduation.

Taylor discusses Preacher Lewis. One of his daughters was Virginia's sorority sister. Everything said about Preacher Lewis is true. You might see Preacher Lewis out walking wherever you might have been in the Mesilla Valley. He always knit while he walked. He knitted baby caps for all the kids he baptized. Taylor recalls that he was a remarkable man with a remarkable family.

Mechanization has had the greatest impact on farming in her lifetime. Insecticides and fertilizers have had a great impact, also. Economical farming dictates that farms be very large because farming is a big business. Farms today are all computerized, and the tractors are air conditioned.

The future of farming is a necessary thing, and it should be recognized as such. Taylor feels that the environmentalists do not have first-hand knowledge of what they are talking about.

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