

**NEW MEXICO
FARM & RANCH
HERITAGE
MUSEUM**

CONSULTANT: John L. Augustine

DATE OF BIRTH: August 29, 1914 GENDER: Male

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: June 9, 2000

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Consultant's home, Las Cruces, New Mexico

INTERVIEWER: Jane O'Cain

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM OTHER _____

TRANSCRIBED: Yes: June 27, 2000

NUMBER OF TAPES: One

ABTRACTOR: Jane O'Cain

DATE ABSTRATED: August 16, 2000

QUALITY OF RECORDING (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Consultant was the Doña Ana County Agent during World War II and administered the prisoner of war labor program in the county.

DATE RANGE: 1943 - 1946

ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

TAPE ONE, SIDE A:

Augustine became Doña Ana County Agriculture Agent in 1937. He discusses the agricultural labor shortage that occurred when men were drafted into the service for World War II.

Organizations such as the Doña Ana County Farm Bureau and the Chamber of Commerce were actively involved in attempting to get a prisoner of war [hereafter POW] camp for the county. There were two camps in Las Cruces, one on Melendres Street. He cannot remember the location of the second camp. There was also a branch camp in Hatch, New Mexico.

The first contingent of POWs was Italian, and they were replaced by German POWs. The consultant states that the German POWs “had to have more guards and be watched more closely. And a lot of them would refuse to work . . .”

The consultant described that he was responsible for assigning POW labor to area farmers. He would attempt to get labor to the farmers where the need was most critical, for example, if a crop was getting too ripe and needed to be harvested immediately. As he remembers it, a committee assisted him in making some of the decisions about the labor assignments.

Augustine would meet with the POW camp commander when negotiating for POW labor. The regulations for the use of POW labor did not change very much during the time the program was in operation. He had telephone conversations with other county agents about the POW program, but does not recall meeting as a group.

The army guards that accompanied the POW labor contingent to the farms were, in most cases, responsible for mediating any conflicts between the POWs and the farmers. If they were unable to resolve the issue, then Mr. Augustine would be called, and he would discuss the situation with the camp commander. If a POW refused to work they “had the place where they kept ‘em, like a jail or confinement . . . two or three times . . . they got pretty rough with some of ‘em.”

In the consultant’s opinion the farmers preferred bracero laborers to the POWs, as “they would work much more willing.” They lived at the farm and were “part of the operation there.” He states that the braceros were accustomed to doing “manual labor” while the POWs had varied work experience.

TAPE ONE, SIDE B:

Part of the difficulty with the prisoners of war as agricultural laborers was related to the fact that they were inexperienced; however, another issue was their reluctance to work: “when you force somebody to do somethin’ it’s never done as good . . .”

The farmers would complain if the cotton picked by the POWs was “dirty,” containing leaves and other debris. Quotas for pounds of cotton picked were placed on the POWs to motivate them to work. Augustine states the quota was “never too high but it was something to shoot at.”

At times the army would transport the POWs to the farms; at other times the farmers provided the transport.

Augustine would put out news releases through the Cooperative Extension Service explaining how to access POW labor and the parameters of the program. He does not believe that there was any attempt to keep the POW labor project on a low profile with the public. He states, "Nobody complained about them . . ." The general public was concerned that the "safety" issues related to having a large number of POWs in town were addressed.

Farmers were given written rules and regulations about their obligations when they used POW labor. One of the rules was non-fraternization with the POWs. The farmers signed an agreement regarding the rate of pay for POW labor.

From the consultant's perspective the most difficult aspect of administering the POW labor program was insuring that the labor got to the farmers in a timely manner. He states there was "some confusion" in dealing with "that many men and that many guards."

His assessment of the POW labor program is positive. He feels it was good for the POWs to have that activity and for the farmers it was "really necessary and performed a good service."