

NEW MEXICO
FARM & RANCH
HERITAGE
MUSEUM

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW ABSTRACT

CONSULTANT: Ernest Aguayo

DATE OF BIRTH: September 24, 1908 GENDER: Male

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: June 14, 19, 25, 26 & July 11, 2001

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

INTERVIEWER: Beth Morgan

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMFRHM

TRANSCRIBED: December 27, 2001

NUMBER OF TAPES: Eleven

ABTRACTOR: Beth Morgan / Donna Wojcik

DATE ABSTRACTED: June 2, 2005

RECORDING QUALITY (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Aguayo's early life and ranching days, raising Herefords from a strain that his father had developed, and the Government taking of the Aguayo ranch for the creation of the Alamogordo Proving Grounds, now known as White Sands Missile Range.

DATE RANGE: 1908-2001

ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

TAPE ONE, SIDE A:

The interview begins with biographical information and a listing of the places Aguayo lived as a child. Aguayo grew up on the Vega Ranch on the Carrizozo flats below Nogal, N. M. Later the family moved to the Tortalito Ranch, which consisted of forty-three deeded acres. Aguayo's father was the first person to take out a permit to lease land for grazing from the Lincoln National Forest beginning in 1913. His father also purchased several other homesteads in that area.

School days are discussed. Aguayo remembers one of the teachers in the one-room school at Nogal, a Mr. Steel, who taught all subjects to students from primary to eighth grade. When the family moved to Carrizozo, the children attended school there.

TAPE ONE, SIDE B:

Aguayo attended first through sixth grade at the school in Nogal and completed the next two grades at the Carrizozo school. After he finished his schooling he became a cowboy and worked with his father. From an early age Aguayo had raised crops to help feed the family, growing feed corn and beans. The garden provided canned goods, and meat was plentiful. The family grew apples, any that they could not sell would be stored in the root cellar. The seed corn was used to feed the chickens and horses. The pinto beans were reserved to feed the family through the winter. A variety of meats were available and included beef, pork, chicken, and venison.

Aguayo often hunted deer, and shot his first buck at age thirteen. He won a total of nine rifles from regional hardware companies for the biggest deer during the years between 1929 and 1950. Aguayo like to eat bear meat, especially if the bear had been fattened up on acorns or piñon nuts.

The homestead's log barn and log house are described. Aguayo and his brother tended the cattle when their father reached an age where he no longer cared to. His father ran cattle for other ranches and did the branding. Aguayo and his father divided the cattle the year before his father sold the ranch and retired. At this time Aguayo purchased six acres of land in Nogal and married. He was the first to have his land surveyed and documented, and the city eventually used his place as a benchmark from which to lay out the streets.

TAPE TWO, SIDE A:

In 1936 his eighteen-month-old daughter was diagnosed with kidney disease, so the family moved to Arizona for treatment. The cause of the disease was determined to be her teeth and tonsils, and after removing any bad teeth and her tonsils she became better. The use of the fluoroscope is described. Aguayo got a job working at the Ripsey Gold Mine, eventually becoming the assistant manager.

Aguayo tells the story about his foreman getting drunk in Sonora, Ariz., being thrown in jail, and starting a fight with him on the way home. His job as assistant manager at the Ripsey Gold Mine is described further.

TAPE TWO, SIDE B:

The discussion returns to New Mexico, where Aguayo acquired his own place to run his cattle. In 1929 he homesteaded a place on the east side of the Oscura Mountains, which consisted of 640 acres of patented land. He had a grazing lease for eighty-four cattle and saddle horses.

Aguayo describes how he met his wife and where they lived after their marriage in 1933. He raised Herefords from a strain that his father had developed. Other features of the ranch are discussed, as well as early residences.

TAPE THREE, SIDE A:

There is more discussion regarding early residences that they lived in. Aguayo delivered mail to the Parsons line near Bonito Lake three times a week, and worked as a lineman and power man for the Forest Service during the summers, and did so before he was married until several years after his marriage. In 1934 he became forest trail foreman. His next job was with the Southern Pacific Railroad.

Details about the Ripsey Gold Mine in Arizona are verified as well as the reasons why he left the mine. The mine was shut down in 1940, and most of the men who worked there were moved to the copper mine at Hayden. Since Aguayo did not want to go to Hayden, he returned home and worked with Peabody Construction in Las Vegas, N. M. He worked there one winter widening and paving a wagon road. In 1941 he began working for the Southern Pacific Railroad, maintaining the water service for the steam engine trains. He maintained 150 miles of pipeline. After the flood in 1941, which filled the Bonito Dam with silt, he assisted in putting eighty miles of pipeline back in service when the Sacramento River washed out. Aguayo had experience handling dynamite, so he was in charge of the rockwork, blasting, and shovels and supervised a crew of men to rebuild the new dam.

TAPE THREE, SIDE B:

The new rock-fill dam at Bonito is discussed. Aguayo's crew obtained the rock, laid it by hand, and cemented them, thus raising the spillway seventeen feet.

The Government taking of the Aguayo ranch is discussed. It was one of many ranches taken for the creation of the Alamogordo Bombing Range. He was paid a \$1000 land use fee with a promise that he would get the land back. Aguayo had no chance to remove any of his belongings before the government use began. He estimates that it took three months from the time he was notified that they were taking his land until he had a chance to meet with the government attorneys. Aguayo had every intention of going back to start over when he got the land back. He notes that the government did not make clear what they were asking ranchers to do in regards to the use of his land, and the pressure that was on them to make a decision. He was left with the understanding that he would get his ranch back when the war was over.

TAPE FOUR, SIDE A:

When the war ended, Aguayo thought he would get to go back to the ranch. He and other ranchers banded together and sent twenty-eight witnesses to Washington. He was not happy to learn that he would not get to go back to his ranch. Based on documentation, many of the ranchers received ongoing, usually quarterly, lease payments from the War Department in return for the use of their land, but no records were found for the Aguayo land.

In the 1970s a man was hired by an El Paso appraisal company to assist with an appraisal of the ranches and mining properties on White Sands Missile Range. Although Aguayo knew the man, he was not told just how much his land was worth, except to say that the value had increased dramatically.

Aguayo's acquaintance with the Cain family is discussed.

TAPE FOUR, SIDE B:

Aguayo believes that the 1970s appraisal of the ranches taken by the government was completed, although he does not know what the result was. Aguayo's situation was different from that of some of the others who had been living on their places full-time immediately prior to the government taking of the ranches, because he had been working out of state, and then with the railroad at the time. Despite this, however, not being able to go back to the ranch hurt him and his family.

Aguayo discusses his involvement in the Court of Claims lawsuit of 1969, along with many other ranchers. While some of the ranchers were happy with their outcomes, most others felt cheated and sought additional compensation through this lawsuit. The lawsuit resulted in money (\$17.5 million) being set aside for additional compensation to the ranchers, but the government reneged and said that they would need to use the compensation funds for defense costs.

The sabotage of Southern Pacific rail tracks is discussed. During the rebuilding of the Bonito Dam, Aguayo discovered that three pounds of dynamite were missing. It turned out to be false; however, emery dust was found in the oil of a truck later on and sabotage was suspected.

TAPE FIVE, SIDE A:

After working for Southern Pacific in Lordsburg, he was transferred to El Paso and worked there as a mechanic-welder. He worked in this capacity until he retired from the railroad.

The story of how he helped rescue Smokey Bear is told. Railroad crews were called to help fight the fire. While headed up the trail to relieve firefighters currently fighting the fire, they came across a ranger carrying a small bear cub. Aguayo helped the ranger with his gear, but when the bear cub became agitated, he removed his jacket and wrapped it around the cub. It quieted down, and they were able to carry it down the mountain and put it in a car. Aguayo's assistance to the orphaned bear was the subject of a newspaper article. The story of another incident between a bear and his friend Otto Farrell is told.

Aguayo prospected for gold on weekends while he was stationed in Lordsburg. He found an old Spanish mine that yielded him some gold. How he came to find this mine is briefly discussed.

TAPE FIVE, SIDE B:

Aguayo learned of a gold camp from a man who brought his horse to him for shoeing. This man had carried mail to the camp as a young man. Based on this man's recollections, Aguayo found the location of the shafts—seven in all—even though the location was not easily accessible due to the sacahuista [a toxic perennial in the lily family] in the area. One of the large shafts had a huge dump that yielded some gold. The main shaft had been sealed but Aguayo opened it with dynamite. The two tunnels he found below yielded quartz with a gold vein in it. He also found pottery, a drill steel of an unusual size, and rock breastworks. These convinced him that it was a Spanish working mine from centuries before. He

eventually sold the mine to a corporation, which named it Three Bells, as several workers heard bells when they were working in the shafts.

TAPE SIX, SIDE A:

Aguayo's name for the mine was the Connee Lynn. The owner of the corporation he sold it to did not work the mine for long and eventually sold his equipment for scrap iron. Apparently the availability of water was an issue. Aguayo re-acquired the mine and sold it a second time to a placer miner a week later.

Aguayo relates a tale about rattlesnakes. He describes the dugout he built at his ranch on White Sands Missile Range and its furnishings. He recalls that in 1994-95 during a visit to his former ranch, he saw wild horses and wild cattle. Today oryx, an African import, roam the range.

More information on the dugout is given. He used slate from the area, recycled tin roofing and pipe in its construction, and completed the dugout in about a week. The house he had built on the homestead had burned down in 1929.

TAPE SIX, SIDE B:

Aguayo discusses replacing the house that burned, visits to the ranch, and the killing of his prize mare's foal by a mountain lion. Neighboring ranches are discussed, and the Court of Claims lawsuit is revisited. The ranchers had organized as the White Sands Missile Range Rancher's Association and sent witnesses to testify in the lawsuit. There is a discussion of who went to Washington. While Aguayo never filed an individual lawsuit to seek compensation, he did participate in the lawsuit.

There is a brief discussion of photographs taken at the Aguayo Ranch.

The rancher's protest is discussed. Aguayo had received a letter from Mary McDonald regarding a meeting to organize a protest. McDonald had put up a sign on her gate stating that the Army was not welcome.

TAPE SEVEN, SIDE A:

The discussion regarding the protest continues. Soldiers came to the gate to evacuate the fifteen protesters, who refused to leave. The soldiers returned with a machine gun and an officer. When requested to vacate the premises, they again refused but allowed the officer to come through the gate and into the house. The officer observed that the ranchers had guns stacked up in the corners, asked them to move off the land while they conducted missile firing, but the ranchers refused for a third time.

The death of Mary McDonald, rattlesnakes on the Bennett Ranch, and the Red Canyon Sheep Company are discussed. Aguayo's work for the Empire Zinc Company in Organ Gap is discussed. He had worked there drilling core samples.

TAPE SEVEN, SIDE B:

In 1948-49 the Aguayos lived in the Carrizozo area. Although Aguayo had dreams of being an independent farmer/rancher, the post-war economy forced him to go out of the business. It was at this time that he moved to Las Cruces, to work as a blacksmith in Mesilla Park, and later for the Empire Zinc exploration division. After the core drilling was completed in the Organ Gap, the company wanted to

send him to South America on a three-year contract. It was a good deal and he took it, but after the deal fell through he went back to work for Southern Pacific Railroad. A chronology of the various jobs he held follows.

TAPE EIGHT, SIDE A:

Back at Southern Pacific, Aguayo and his co-workers laid twenty miles of asbestos pipe from Vaughn to Pastura, N.M, near Santa Rosa. The story of a near-fatal train accident is told. The cause of the accident was attributed to cracks to the train's front driver. The foreman in charge of checking the trains every time they left the station was fired and put on trial. He lost his pension. In 1964 Aguayo traded assessment work for a half interest in seven mining claims near Hillsboro, eventually trading for the other half as well. Drilling a well on the site was an adventure. It took six weeks to drill three hundred feet, giving plenty of water.

TAPE EIGHT, SIDE B:

The discussion of the well at Hillsboro continues. Aguayo had to run electricity to the well. The submersible pump he installed lasted eighteen years, but burned out when it was hit by lightning. The replacement pump had a lightning protector.

Aguayo shows a skin graft he got after being electrocuted while working for Southern Pacific. He had been tasked with removing the gas line pipe in the building for reuse. He had no way of knowing that there was still electricity to the building. He had been knocked twenty feet away and his lungs hurt. He was able to get up and one of his co-workers drove him home. He began to vomit once he arrived at home, and the next day his wife insisted that he go to the doctor. The doctor sent him to San Francisco to a company doctor, and after some tests Aguayo was told that he had suffered brain damage from the shock and it would affect him to some degree all his life. He qualified for one hundred percent disability.

TAPE NINE, SIDE A:

Southern Pacific had offered Aguayo a \$40,000 settlement, but he learned that the attorney's firm had used up the majority of his award for their services. Aguayo had drawn \$2,000 from his settlement, but when he received his check he only received \$640. He never received any additional money on his insurance claim. He did receive his retirement benefits, but he had only been paid based on his wage of \$6.90 per hour. Had he continued to work for another two years, his retirement would have been based on a wage scale of \$15.00 per hour. If he had been able to continue working for another two years, his retirement pay would have been higher. Aguayo suffers with bouts of trembling and other neurological problems as a result of the electrocution.

Aguayo's hunting career is discussed. His brother taught him to hunt with hounds, and Aguayo became a good marksman. He won his first prize at the age of twenty-one—a Winchester rifle. The prize had been given by Kelly Hardware, and other merchants began offering prizes. One year he won five different guns for the same deer.

TAPE NINE, SIDE B:

There is a continued discussion of prizes won for deer hunting. In 1934 Aguayo's father purchased a place in Tortalito Canyon. Bears would come down to eat the peaches in the orchard. Aguayo killed two bears himself and took a total of twelve hides to sell in Roswell. He only got one dollar each for the

hides. Aguayo's wife had been afraid that the bears would come after her newborn daughter, but Aguayo assured her that they would not come because they were scared of humans.

Although Aguayo did not hunt elk as a young man, he did kill an elk at age 84. He made a ring out of one of the elk teeth. The story is told about winning a county Thanksgiving turkey shoot.

TAPE TEN, SIDE A:

The turkey shoot saga continues. Aguayo tells of Colonel Tinnie, who was in charge of the German POW camp at Fort Stanton. Tinnie had tried to win as many turkeys as he could to feed to the Germans [internees], but Aguayo out shot him, and Tinnie left broke with only nine turkeys. Aguayo also hunted wild turkeys, and since they were plentiful in the area, he could actually shoot them from the door of his house.

Aguayo's wife is discussed and was "the greatest person in the world." She crocheted blankets, and made her daughters' clothes. She was a good money manager and could stretch forty or fifty dollars of groceries to last a month.

Family background is discussed. Aguayo's grandfather, a lawyer, schoolteacher, and justice of the peace in Lincoln County witnessed the Lincoln County War and knew Billy the Kid.

TAPE TEN, SIDE B:

Family background is continued. The Aguayo name comes from Spain. The family has identified the family crest, which contains a symbol for water that relates to a specific river from which three brothers saved the prince of Spain. The Aguayo name originated from this incident. To his knowledge, Aguayo does not believe his family experienced discrimination due to his Mexican roots. The family attended a Baptist church in Carrizozo.

TAPE ELEVEN, SIDE A:

Family roots discussion continues. More family photos are shown. Aguayo's father spoke Castilian Spanish; kids, teenagers, and adults alike loved to hear him speak. More information is given in regards to Aguayo's grandfather's friendship with Billy the Kid. Billy would visit him, seek advice, and play a guitar. There is an article that says that Aguayo's grandfather was responsible for putting a gun in an outhouse for Billy the Kid. Whether Billy was the one who actually retrieved it is uncertain.