

**NEW MEXICO
FARM & RANCH
HERITAGE
MUSEUM**

CONSULTANT: Luis Sanchez

DATE OF BIRTH: March 25, 1935 GENDER: Male

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: August 3, 15, and 29, 2001

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum

INTERVIEWER: Jane O'Cain

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM OTHER _____

TRANSCRIBED: Yes: July 16, 2002

NUMBER OF TAPES: Seven

ABTRACTOR: Sheila Klug

DATE ABSTRACTED: July 30, 2002

QUALITY OF RECORDING (SPECIFY): Excellent

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Life at Stahmann Farms as seen by the consultant as a boy and as a young adult.

DATE RANGE: 1936 - 1980s

ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

TAPE ONE, SIDE A:

Mr. Sanchez was born in El Paso, Texas, to José and Manuela Sanchez, both of who were from Jalisco, Mexico.

The elder Mr. Sanchez was working as a machinist for Snell Machine Works in El Paso, where he worked on a job for Mr. Dean Stahmann of Stahmann Farms. Mr. Stahmann offered him a job as a machinist, and the Sanchezes moved to Stahmann farms when the consultant was approximately one year old. At that time much of the farm was still undeveloped; they had begun installing the first pecan trees in 1933.

The consultant described the eleven sections the farm was divided into and named them. Each section had its own foreman and was essentially a self-contained unit. In the early days they were using mules, and this meant the mule teams wouldn't have to go several miles just to get to the field. In addition to pecans, the farm also grew cotton, milo, alfalfa, sugar beets, and cantaloupes. Mr. Stahmann wanted to keep his workers employed all the time, which is why his farm was diversified into crops, which could be rotated. The consultant's father referred to this as "the Studebaker concept," most likely referring to the fact that the parents passed along their knowledge and skills to their children.

The farm provided the workers with free housing, water, and electricity. The early homes were built of adobe.

Mr. Sanchez mentions a book, *Honey Girl*, which includes information about the Stahmanns. They came from Missouri to the valley south of El Paso in the Fabens area, and brought up most of the first workers from Fabens. They eventually bought what became Stahmann Farms, which was part of the *Santo Tomás* grant.

The consultant describes the dirt drainage ditches that were in place when he was a small boy.

TAPE ONE, SIDE B:

In addition to small homes for a single family, there were *cuadras* or *viviendas*, which housed multiple families. There were also *solos*, which were essentially cubicles for people (mostly men) living alone.

The consultant talked about the different types of workers on the farms. Most of them were of Mexican descent. In addition to family units, there were single (not necessarily unmarried) men, bracero workers, some seasonal employees, occasional day laborers from the surrounding area, and finally, prisoners of war.

Mr. Sanchez stated, "There was always work at Stahmann Farms." Most of the workers were paid by the hour; cotton pickers were paid by the pound.

When he was twelve years old, Mr. Sanchez began working on the farm by building boxes in which to ship cantaloupes. The first summer he was not paid, but the next summer he earned twenty-five cents an hour. This was the basic rate at the time; only people who drove tractors made more.

The consultant stated that as a child he did not dream of being a fireman or a policeman, partly because they did not have policemen or firemen on the farm. He dreamed of being old enough to go out and rope the mules, dress them out, and take them out to work. Because his father had only a fourth grade education he stressed the value of education to all of his children—the girls as well as the boys.

Mr. Sanchez's great aunt lived in one of the *solos* and worked chopping cotton. Some of the men living in *solos* and boarded with one of the families. Sometimes the woman of the family would also do the laundry for the *solos* boarding with her. Most of the single men, though, cooked for themselves and looked after themselves.

The consultant described in some detail how work was organized during the harvest season(s). Early in the morning the foremen of the various sections would have a conference, via an old crank telephone, to determine the work being done that day. For example, the men might tend cattle or sheep early in the day and then chop cotton. His wife and children might be chopping cotton during the whole day.

TAPE TWO, SIDE A:

Mr. Sanchez's older sister started school at the farm. There was a part-time teacher named Mrs. Ansley who came to the farm. She was very dedicated and was well thought of because she could speak Spanish. Mr. Sanchez and his siblings went to school in Mesilla Park because his parents were willing to take him to the bus stop. Most of the other children on the farm went to school in the village of San Miguel.

The consultant described the work done on the premises. He called Stahmann Farms "our town." It was a self-contained city and had a commissary, shops, fabrication plant, blacksmith, etc. Many people were cross-trained to work in several different areas. Mr. Stahmann wanted his people to do what was needed. He did not want to wait for some outside shop to do the work for him, another reason he had his people living on-site.

The consultant described the commissary and what it contained. Although they could pay cash, most people bought things on credit and made arrangements to pay on payday or have the amount taken out of the paycheck. Mr. Sanchez said often people would get so in debt that the commissary would just write them off to start all over again. The commissary was a non-profit entity. Although people were allowed to buy off the farm—and in later years some did—Mr. Stahmann told them that they were better off shopping at the commissary, that the prices were cheaper and they could get credit.

Mr. Sanchez's family, like most people on the farm, had a victory garden during World War II. They were allowed to keep chickens, but not dairy cows. The head foreman, Clarence Southerland, had a dairy cow and distributed milk personally to the families. He charged a nickel a quart; there was no mention made of pasteurization.

The consultant talked briefly about Mr. Stahmann. He wore work clothes and rode a horse in order to oversee the entire place. He might show up at any time. The whole Stahmann family, he said, was not one to show their affluence.

TAPE TWO, SIDE B: Blank

TAPE THREE, SIDE A:

Mr. Sanchez began by naming the foremen of the eleven sections. They were Jesus Quivara of *Christo*, Ramon Armendariz of *Rincón*, Ventura Reyes of *Ojito*, José Reyes of *Palmilla*, and Refugio Reyes of *Lomas*. The three Reyeses were brothers. *Plaza's* foreman was Sebastian Sanchez, Manuel Rivas had *Esperanza*, and Rafael Delgado had *Le Fe*. West Snow [Farm] was run by Miguel Beltran, North Snow by Dario Garcia, and South Snow by a man named Solis.

The consultant went on to describe the Garcia family and the jobs they had on the farm.

Talk then turned to the pecans grown and harvested on the farm. Two of the varieties the consultant remembers are Schenleys and Bradleys. He reported that the farm had large nurseries, where they did a lot of plant grafting. They sold trees all over the United States and to Mexico.

He could not verify or dispute the stories that the Stahmann family got into the pecan business by accident when an order of trees arrived at the railroad depot in El Paso and the person who ordered them could not pay the C.O.D. charges.

Mr. Sanchez explained how the people harvesting cotton had their own sacks and how they cared for them, including extra liners so they could be dragged along the ground and still last out the season. He also explained why they couldn't pick cotton if it was too moist: it could get moldy and it adds too much weight to the cotton.

Mr. Stahmann would not use machinery to pick the cotton. He wanted his cotton to be hand picked so the gin would not be cluttered with foreign matter. Hand picking, he felt, kept the grade of his cotton the highest.

The consultant was not sure if large amount of cotton being stored could generate enough heat to start a fire, but he said it was a "cozy place to burrow into." The farm did not want the children to tunnel into the cotton, though, because if they got deep enough they could get trapped and suffocate.

TAPE THREE, SIDE B:

The consultant is not sure when cotton was phased out. He remembers the government buying up all the cotton during World War II. He thinks it was phased out some time during the 1950s. He remembers cotton growing between the young pecan trees, but as the trees grew they created too much shade to grow the cotton.

In addition to cotton and pecan trees they had cattle and sheep on the farm. After that came the geese. These geese are sometimes referred to as "weeder geese" because they ate weeds and sometimes as "breeder geese," because their goslings were sold to other farmers to eat weeds. The geese were also sold as food to processing plants, such as Hormel and Swift.

The geese must have been brought in during the late 1940s because Mr. Sanchez's family moved off the farm when Mr. Sanchez was about fourteen or fifteen, and the geese had been there for about a year. Because dogs would attack the geese the families were told that they could not have a dog and live on the premises. The four children in the Sanchez family were not about to part with their two dogs, so the family, reluctantly, left the farm.

About 1953 the Stahmanns started the chicken business, principally for the eggs. The consultant did not know the exact number, but there were “tens of thousands” of them. Almost every farm (section) had chickens and geese. He described the chicken houses and how they were operated. Mr. Stahmann never did anything in a small way, it seems.

Mr. Sanchez talked about the sorters, which sorted the pecans by size. Those were made from four by eight or four by ten sheets of metal there on the premises. Mr. Sanchez’s father made the dies for them.

The consultant also described the shearing of sheep. This was done by contractors from Wyoming or Montana. The sheep had replaced the cattle on the Stahmann farm. This probably occurred during the time of the Second World War. Sheep take up less room and also produce two crops: wool and lamb, although Mr. Sanchez cannot recall the sheep being slaughtered there on the farm as he can the chickens and geese. He thinks the sheep were sold to slaughter plants in other parts of the country.

It was important to the operation that people be kept busy. If, for example, they were not working directly with the growing or harvesting of pecans they would work with the chickens, geese, or whatever. The young people would be trained to do whatever tasks were needed.

TAPE FOUR, SIDE A:

The consultant continued his discussion of how the company cross-trained people and would promote people they thought were doing a good job.

Mr. Sanchez described the different types of houses on the farm. The older houses were adobe, but the later ones were built of cinder block. He remembers watching workers construct adobe blocks when he was a child. He also describes how his family did not request better accommodations but was asked if they wanted to move to a better house in a different section.

The consultant once again referred to Mr. Stahmann as a humanitarian and would not do anything that would be detrimental to his workers. Unfortunately, even Mr. Stahmann could not see the deleterious effects of insecticides.

Mr. Stahmann came up with a profit-sharing pension trust plan in 1945—something unheard of for farm workers at that time.

The majority of the workers spoke Spanish. There was one telephone for the field workers. The consultant describes how every night the telephone was set outside the window in case of emergency. There were two doctors—Dr. Davier and Dr. Jenkins—who could be called upon. Later on, Dr. Jenkins’s son had clinic hours on the farm.

When the Salk vaccine for polio came along, Mr. Sanchez was asked to go out to try to convince the people that they should get immunized and have their children immunized. The vaccinations were given at the clinic.

The discussion next turned to the war years, specifically with the prisoners of war (POWs) who were used on the farm. Mr. Stahmann explained to the workers that the POWs were coming to work, where they were from, and why they were there. The consultant remembers being curious about the POWs and wanting to see if they looked different. When he told his father, “They don’t look like anybody mean,” his father explained that they were just people who had families far

away and who had to be there for a time. His father told him they were to be addressed and treated like any other adult. In other words, "Mister," not "hey you."

The consultant talked about their being somewhat isolated on the farm. Town was seven miles away, and the farm children felt that was near the end of the earth. They referred to the citizens as "Las Cruces people." The townspeople sometimes called them *chiveros*, which is a demeaning remark, which means goat herders.

Mr. Sanchez also remembers giving his precious pedal car to the scrap iron drive.

They had a soup line in school. For five cents they were given canned milk diluted with water and soup, made principally with sugar beets, onions, and possibly cabbage. He also, as did most children, worked in his family's victory garden.

He remembers going to the movies when he visited his grandmother in El Paso. This cost seven cents. There he developed an interest in history from the Pathé news. He doesn't remember the news being strident and saying things like, "The Italians are our enemies."

TAPE FOUR, SIDE B:

Talk of the Second World War continued. The consultant talked about bond drives and buying savings stamps for the war effort. They grew vegetables at home to furnish produce not available in stores. He said they never did without and credits Mr. Stahmann for this. Stahmann Farms also contributed their fair share of military people

In school the teachers did not emphasize hatred of the Axis countries. The consultant related an incident he recalled from his grammar school days. One of the students, Nancy Toshira, was Japanese. Someone said something about the "Japs" to Nancy and she retorted, "Well, you give me any trouble . . . I'll have them come over and bomb you." The remark was made as a defense mechanism, but the teacher used it as an opportunity to teach that Nancy was like everyone else and explained that we all are immigrants. Both children apologized and everyone went back to being "kids again."

No contact was permitted between the farm people and the POWs. The consultant wanted to have been allowed to get closer to them and observe them, but his father told him to "stay out of their way." The POWs worked separately from the other workers. Again the elder Mr. Sanchez explained that the POWs are just ordinary people caught up in turmoil. The consultant does remember and describes how they were dressed: military garb similar to our soldiers and shorts in hot weather.

He did not notice much of a difference between the Italians and the Germans except that they spoke a different language. He reported his knowledge of Spanish was not a great help in understanding Italian. His family impressed upon him the necessity of learning the English language and to work hard to take advantage of the opportunities this country provided.

His mother had not yet applied for her U.S. citizenship when the war broke out. She was not permitted to get it until after the war and was therefore unable to visit her family in Mexico. The consultant believes that the freeze on citizenship was because some of the Latin American countries, while officially neutral, sympathized with Germany.

TAPE FIVE, SIDE A:

The discussion began with a description of processing pecans and the machine it required. Most of the equipment was purchased and then modified there on the premises. The facility they had there was very complete and, he feels, was “next to none.” They had a blacksmith shop, a full-fledged machine shop, and an automotive repair shop. There was not anything on the farm that could not be repaired, replaced, or modified. They would buy a piece of equipment and change and change and change it until they got it to suit their needs.

The first piece of equipment developed there was the machine to shake the pecan trees. It was the first one that the consultant saw manufactured from “stem to stern,” and it was mounted on an old Case tractor. Before this machine was developed, workers had to climb the tree and use bamboo sticks to knock the pecans down

The next equipment the consultant saw come in was the harvester to pick up the pecans. At first the workers raked the pecans into windrows, and the machine picked the pecans up. Then they bought a harvesting machine that would pick up the pecans and process them through a cleaning device and drop the pecans into a trailer behind it. Later they had mechanized harvesters called *escobas* (brooms), which worked like vacuum cleaners.

The first purchased machines were bought in northern California from a company called Ramacker. These machines were modified at Stahmann Farms, principally to make them more effective in cleaning the pecans of leaves. The consultant believes the shakers were purchased from someplace in San Antonio, Texas.

Plus, some machines were created for other kinds of nuts, so these had to be modified. There was a great deal of fine-tuning of these machines year after year. Changes could not really be started until harvest started; this put a great deal of pressure on workers like Mr. Sanchez’s father to get the machines working right. This was due to things like some sectors having more leaves and debris in some years. So year after year the machines were modified to suit the needs of that season.

The pecan harvest began in the late fall after they had what Mr. Stahmann called “a black freeze,” or *una helada negra*. Mr. Sanchez explained why the freeze is necessary to get the pecans to open up.

Initially, there were two processing plants: one at Snow Ranch and the other in *Plaza*. The one at Snow was the earliest one and was very small. It received the trailers and they dumped the pecans into water. The pecans floated to the top and were cleansed of leaves, twigs, and the like.

The consultant explained how the pecans were sorted by size and then put through the cracking machines. He explained how the cracking machines, in order to work properly, had to be set to the size of the pecans it was cracking. The pecan meats would then be sorted on another sorting table. Whole pieces, half pieces, large pieces, and small pieces were each packaged separately.

TAPE FIVE, SIDE B:

The consultant talked briefly about the changes in emphasis on the farm. Originally, cotton, cattle and sheep were important in order to keep the farm diverse and its people employed. But eventually the pecan business gained in importance. It was vital that the pecans be harvested

quickly because if they are allowed to remain on the wet ground, their grade and color would deteriorate.

Mr. Sanchez talks about the various places the pecans were sold to; there was no roadside stand at that point.

When he was thirteen, Mr. Sanchez asked his father's boss, Mr. Southerland, for a job in the machine shop. From this job he learned a great deal and, with his father's encouragement, he was moved around so that he could learn more. He also drove a dump truck.

Right after high school Mr. Sanchez went into service. When he returned he did not go back to the farm because he had become independent and did not want to be under his father's wings. He worked installing and repairing irrigation pumps for the Meerscheidts.

Eventually he went back to Stahmann Farms and stayed until the early sixties, or perhaps until 1965. When he came back to Stahmann Farms, cotton was almost on its way out and pecans were the major crop. He found the operation of the farm had become more sophisticated. There were daily meetings, at which time the work to be done was discussed and directives from upper management were passed along.

The consultant described spraying for insects and the problems that DDT eventually caused. At age fourteen Mr. Sanchez started loading the dusting plane with DDT. Even though they wore handkerchiefs around their face to avoid inhaling the powder, they would still inhale it. "It was all over the place."

Just before the consultant went into the service Stahmanns started with the cage layer hens. They were not phased out until after he left there in the sixties. He remembers he had not left for service yet when they started building the cages.

Talk then returned to the pruning of the pecan trees. The consultant does not recall exactly how the trees were pruned, but he remembers seeing "mountains" of branches. They were pruned by hand in the early days.

He also describes the specialists coming in to graft the trees because they wanted thin shell pecans. Mr. P. O. Woods was one of the people involved in the pruning. In later years the farm had nurseries and sold many trees to Mexico and other parts of the United States.

Later on they had motorized equipment to prune the trees. The first ones were called "squirrels" because they were pneumatic. The workers sat in baskets elevated through hydraulics or pneumatics. In later years they bought equipment that just squared things off. These machines had blades three feet in diameter and just went down the rows and left the trees so wide and so tall.

Most of the pruning was done in the early spring, as soon as the pecan crop was over. Mr. Sanchez remembers their killing insects—primarily aphids. Some of the insecticides used were Systocs and Dysyston.

The consultant describes working on the pumps used to water the groves. There were three wells being pumped. He described seeing all the water—millions of gallons—coming out the ground. The pumps ran twenty-four hours a day for perhaps thirty days.

TAPE SIX, SIDE A:

Talk of irrigation continues. Pecan trees require a great deal of water. The consultant describes getting water from the Elephant Butte Irrigation District (E.B.I.D.) and their own pumps. He explained how sometimes the irrigation pump would discharge into the irrigation systems, the ditches or the *San Tomás* lateral. At one time there were fourteen or sixteen irrigation wells on the farm.

The consultant also talked about how the children were often taught skills needed on the farm by their fathers. Their childhood was in a sense an apprenticeship.

The old management hierarchy with a foreman for each area has changed because things became so highly mechanized. Communications in the early days were slow, and work was done at a slower pace. When the pace sped up, you could not fractionalize your authority in so many places. It had to be centralized.

More services are now contracted out. In the early eighties Mr. Sanchez opened his own machine shop (the A1 Machine Shop), and he received work from Stahmann Farms.

Mr. Sanchez's father retired twice. He learned that he did not want to rest and travel and was glad to go back and help out for a few years. When Dean Stahmann, Jr., moved to Australia in the early sixties, Mr. Sanchez was asked to go back and help produce some items such as sizers they would need to send to the pecan farm in Australia.

His father worked on sorting machines because the machines had to be calibrated to sort just the way they wanted it done. Later they developed a machine to sort the pecan meats by color. [One of these devices has been donated to the Museum.] The different colored pecans do not taste different, but a display of differing textures and colors is not as attractive to the customer.

In the forties Mr. Stahmann implemented a retirement system for the workers. Mr. Sanchez described how the system worked and provided a pamphlet (written in Spanish) which had been given to the workers. [He gave a copy of this pamphlet to the Museum.] The plan at that time called for the people to contribute to a retirement fund that guaranteed workers in good standing who reached age 65 \$45 a month. Later the program changed into what they called a "profit sharing pension trust." Essentially the workers needed three years in the system to become a participant. By the fourth year each had ten per cent. If a worker left the farm on the fourth year, he would get ten percent of the vested interest in his name.

Also, starting in the fifties, Stahmanns began distributing a cash bonus based on that year's profits. Every year a cash bonus would be distributed based on that year's profits.

The consultant also described how, when he got married in 1959, he bought his furniture and appliances through the commissary at the farm. Essentially, he went to a warehouse in El Paso, picked out he wanted, and Stahmanns paid for it. Then money was deducted from his pay each week to pay for it.

The consultant further explained the profit-sharing plan. Part of the vested interest in the fund would be used to buy blue chip stock. Therefore the pot was growing and the worker was growing as becoming more qualified for picking up a higher percentage of what was in the pot. Every year the workers were given status reports on their total investment and how the pension

trust fund did. The consultant reports that while the people were not really suspicious of the plan they did not really understand it.

In addition to this plan the farm paid for an annuity with an insurance company. At the end of so many years a worker received a monthly annuity until he died. After that his widow received half of that amount.

TAPE SIX, SIDE B:

As stated on the previous tape, many of the workers did not understand how the plan worked, but the consultant feels that his parents got much more back than they had put in. He described how, after a good year, on cash bonus day Mr. Stahmann would say, "All right, with all that money you got are you gonna loan me part of it? How much would you loan me?" So they would put money back into the pension trust fund.

Mr. Sanchez reported that some people had doubts that they were doing the best thing they could by staying there, but on balance there was more things in place to make up for the difference in pay.

The consultant concluded his story of how he bought his furniture through the commissary. He was given a voucher saying he was from Stahmann Farms and then to a warehouse in El Paso. Stahmanns paid for the items, and he repaid Stahmanns. He does not recall having to pay interest on the loan.

Mr. Stahmann would also allow some car dealerships to come in on bonus day and display cars. Mr. Stahmann would do everything to protect the people from getting a raw deal. The consultant described Mr. Stahmann as a "protective hen." Although Stahmann Farms would not pay for the car as they did with the furniture, the dealers knew they were dealing with Stahmann Farms and if they wanted to continue dealing with Stahmanns they were going to offer a good deal and a good product.

Mr. Sanchez reported that every time he talks to older people who lived and worked at Stahmann Farms and asked about their lives on the farm, the people smile and report that things could not have been better.

Talk then turned to fiestas on the farm. At Christmas they had a fiesta called *Las Pastores*, which was the concept of the devil fighting the archangel. Everyone one participated. They all wore masks and re-enacted the battle. This was principally done by the adults. Later he said this might have been at Easter rather than at Christmas.

There was also a harvest festival, which was not your usual festival of everyone eating a great deal of food. They had *matachines*, which was as much Native American as it was Catholic. It was in the form of a dance and was asking for a good crop. He describes the dance and how it moved from sector to sector on the farm.

There were also parties permitted on the premises, but Mr. Stahmann would not allow parties that would be rowdy or noisy. Most of the fiestas were for baptisms, weddings, and the like. These were held in a building described as "the salon."

The consultant described the bands and how he as a child enjoyed peeking through the windows and watching people dance. He would then go home and clown around and show his parents how particular people danced.

There was very little drinking going on at these parties. Mr. Stahmann did not condone liquor to any great extent on the farm because he did not want people to make enemies out of their coworkers. At that time one took off his hat when he walked up to the boss, not because the boss was a rich man but because he was a man of authority. The consultant feels this is because they were Mexicans, as they called themselves. "Hispanics" was a word unknown to them at that time, he reports.

TAPE SEVEN, SIDE A:

The consultant continued by explaining that no one questioned the expectations of the boss. They felt that as long as they lived on the premises they would do as they were told, not because it was a command but out of respect for the people who owned the property. Mr. Sanchez feels they were grateful to be a part of the organization.

TAPE SEVEN, SIDE B: Blank