

**NEW MEXICO  
FARM & RANCH  
HERITAGE  
MUSEUM**

**ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM  
INTERVIEW ABSTRACT**

CONSULTANT: Abe Peña

DATE OF BIRTH: November 8, 1926 GENDER: Male

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: April 17, 1996

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Abe Peña's home in Grants, New Mexico

INTERVIEWER: Jane O'Cain / Robert Hart

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM X OTHER \_\_\_\_\_

TRANSCRIBED: Yes: December 16, 1997

NUMBER OF TAPES: Two

ABTRACTOR: O'Cain

DATE ABSTRACTED: April 9, 1999

QUALITY OF RECORDING (SPECIFY): Distractions at times due to wind blowing into the microphone.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Abe Peña talks about sheep ranching in west central New Mexico, and the Hispanic history of the area.

DATE RANGE: 1800 - 1996

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

### **TAPE ONE, SIDE A:**

History of the wool squeeze machine developed by Professor Neal at New Mexico State University. Neal developed the machine to assist the sheep breeders in determining which of their sheep were producing cleaner wool.

Until the 1970s there were a lot of commercial sheep ranchers in the Grants area, however, when the government no longer allowed coyotes to be poisoned, commercial sheep raising was no longer practical. Now only small herds belonging to American Indians are left. Other than these herds, the only sheep grown commercially in New Mexico are in the Lincoln-Roswell-Vaughn area.

Use of the wool squeeze machine was promoted through the wool specialists of the Extension Service, and the County Agents.

The Peña Ranch was established in 1916. Abe Peña's grandfather, who bought the ranch, died at age 43. His widow remarried.

Discusses that the sheep classification system (Super, A,B,C) was based on the length of the staple (fleece); the size of the sheep (they wanted to breed a larger sheep); whether a ewe had an "open face" (one that didn't have wool growing near the eyes); and ewes that were good mothers. The Peña's raised Rambouillet sheep. They were important for their "gregarious instinct," or the instinct to stay with the herd.

Abe Peña's father bought the ranch from his mother and stepfather in 1942.

Discusses when, as a child, he was expected to start helping with the sheep. That occurred when he was age 12. He was sent to act as an assistant to the herder. He spent three months herding on the forest permit his father leased on Mount Taylor. He was allowed to come in from the camps on St. John's Day, June 24<sup>th</sup> and Saint Ann's day on July 26<sup>th</sup>. States that the most difficult work was herding sheep during the drought, moving the herd to get enough water and forage.

The more lanolin in a sheep's fleece, the dirtier the wool will be. The Rambouillet had a high content of lanolin in the wool.

The Peña's usually bred their ewes to lamb in May when the grass and weeds were starting to get green. This made for a better lamb crop. In early years they would shear after the ewes had lambed, but with the addition of barns they began to shear in April.

By shearing earlier a rancher avoided problems with worms that could develop in the summer. They continued to lamb in May, because they achieved a higher rate of conception if the ewes were bred in December.

### **TAPE ONE, SIDE B:**

The fact that their sheep were lambing at the same time the coyotes were having their pups, led to an inevitable clash between the rancher and the coyotes. The lambs were not the coyotes preferred food, but the mother coyote took the lamb from "necessity."

However the pups started chasing and killing the lambs, and continued this pattern in their later years. The coyotes eventually overwhelmed the sheep ranchers.

Many of the Hispanic sheep ranchers made a transition to raising cattle, while others found opportunities for work outside of ranching. In this area of the state a rancher can raise four sheep for every one cow. Peña believes that if a sheep ranch is poorly managed, sheep can do more damage to the land than cattle because of their instinct to congregate in large herds.

During WWII sheep raisers responded to a request from the government to increase wool production, and after the war the ranges were overstocked. Although they began to reduce sheep numbers, environmentalists criticized them for destroying the land.

The average rainfall in the Grants' area is nine inches per year. He remembers the drought of the 1950's, when he was foreman at the Cerro Prieto Ranch (near Reserve, New Mexico) owned by the Hubbells. He believes that drought cycles are about ten years in duration ('50s dry, '60s wet, '70s dry, '80s wet, '90s dry).

There were only two community land grants in Cibola County and none were made to individuals. The real end of open range ranching came as a result of the railroad. The railroad could move barbed wire and windmills, and Texas Cattlemen and homesteaders soon followed. The land was not "stolen" from the Hispanics, however, they were at a disadvantage because they did not understand the language or the culture.

The Peña ranch, put together by Abe's grandfather, consisted of one section that was homesteaded; and two townships that had been "leased-purchased" from the railroad. His grandfather died two years later, and the family thought it would be too difficult to keep both townships, so they dropped one of the leases.

Abe's family settled in San Mateo after leaving the village of Seboyeta (founded in 1800), the first Hispanic settlement in west central New Mexico.

The Spanish were able to do a great deal of exploration in the New World because they took their "supermarket," their sheep with them. The Spanish were interested in territorial expansion and to convert the native population to Christianity. The search for gold was secondary.

He discusses a saddle that he is donating to the Museum. It was made by Kurt Clousen of Ramah in 1959.

Hi Overten, former president of the New Mexico Wool Growers and Bill Hubbell (and his son) were killed while hunting coyotes from airplanes.

### **TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE:**

Discusses a five-gallon barrel he is donating to the Museum, and the barrel's uses. The two men at the sheep camp would use about five gallons of water per day. The barrels would keep water relatively cool. Sometimes the barrels would be draped with wet gunnysacks to keep the water even cooler. He also donated some coyote traps that were used by government trappers when they were trying to control the coyote.

As an aside, Abe mentions that during Prohibition "moonshine" was referred to as "lamp oil."

In 1964, the Congress outlawed the use of poison to control coyote. Prior to that they used cyanide pills and cyanide gas guns. Describes how lanterns were used to try to dissuade coyote from coming close to the sheep herds, but it was not too successful.

Discusses the Hispanic shepherds, who took a great deal of pride in their work. However, many of them served in the armed forces in WWII, and never returned to the villages. They were only three miles from the Navajo reservation, and hired Navajo shepherders until the 1950's, when the Navajo herders began to look for other opportunities. It was at this time that the Peña fenced the ranch with net wire and turned the sheep out like cattle.

Describes the daily routine of the camp tender. They prepared the meal. Usually the tender and herder ate two sheep a month (or about a pound and a half of meat per day). They would cook beans and mutton overnight, and prepare a pot of red chile in the morning. At noon the herder and the sheep would rest for about two hours.

The tender would get firewood in the afternoon, and would track any sheep that were missing from the day before. He was also responsible for going to meet the grocer once a month, who would come to a certain meeting point. Discusses the staples that the tender would bring back in the boxes he packed on his burros.

Discussed the book he is writing. *Stories of Cibola* [published as *Memories of Cibola*, 1997] he originally printed the stories in the Grants newspaper at the time that Grants was trying to recover from the loss of uranium mining. He first started writing stories in 1988. The first story he wrote was "Los Comanches." He describes the ritual which revolves around the stealing of the Christ Child. The ritual was started in the communities along the Rio Grande during the Spanish Colonial era.

### **TAPE TWO, SIDE TWO:**

Discusses that he writes primarily about people who are deceased, about places, and folklore.

Peña also hosts a television program, "Seniors in Action."

Abe Peña went to direct the Peace Corp in Central America in 1972.