



ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
INTERVIEW ABSTRACT

CONSULTANT: Ernest Perez

DATE OF BIRTH: April 1, 1924 GENDER: Male

DATE (S) OF INTERVIEW: July 25, 2004 & February 27, 2005

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Perez residence in Encino, N.M.

INTERVIEWER: Ramona L. Caplan

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM OTHER _____

TRANSCRIBED: No

NUMBER OF TAPES: Four

ABTRACTOR: Ramona L. Caplan/Donna Wojcik

DATE ABSTRACTED: November 23, 2005

QUALITY OF RECORDING (SPECIFY): Good.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Perez family sheep ranch, wool industry, New Mexico sheep growers

DATE RANGE: 1924-2004

ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

TAPE ONE, SIDE A:

Ernest begins with a discussion of his father's cousin, Eugenio Perez, Sr. who came to New Mexico in 1901. Eugenio was one of the first landholders in New Mexico. Eugenio wrote a letter to Ernest's father in the Basque region of northern Spain and asked him to come to New Mexico.

Ernest's father, Victor, was fifteen years old when he made the trip from Isaba, a small community in the Pyrenees along the northern Spanish border. His trip took him from Spain to New York, by train to Lamy, and then N.M, by wagon south to a community now known as Vaughn. The Santa Fe Railroad arrived in the early 1900s. Land was wide-open range, with no government interference of any kind. People from the Pyrenees region of Spain had an instinct for sheep.

When Ernest was ten or eleven years old, Encino was a Basque settlement. Most of its inhabitants had come from the same community in Spain. There is a discussion about his father's family members who moved here, as well as a discussion about Ernest's siblings.

Encino had a big school. Ernest served on the Board of Education for thirty-five consecutive years. School programs and graduates, as well as Ernest's children are discussed.

During WWII, Ernest was attending New Mexico State University. He was a member of the ROTC and enlisted as a reservist, eventually being called up for active duty.

Ernest recalls the Depression years. He recalls that rural children had a rougher time and that chickens, cattle, hogs and sheep were shared with others. He started chores when he was ten years, old. His brother, Cipriano, went alone to herd the sheep. They were responsible for 600 sheep. In those days, dogs were not used to herd the sheep. He recalls that they moved the camp every two to three weeks (when they ran out of pasture), and they had to move the pole tent and stove with them every time they moved. Groceries were brought to them every eight days and consisted of beans, rice, lard, salt, sugar, Karo syrup, cheese, raisins, dried fruit, and a little meat.

TAPE ONE, SIDE B:

Ernest begins with a discussion of the sheep camp and their sleeping arrangements. They got water from dirt tanks that collected rainwater. They also used a wagon pulled by mules to collect water. He talks about the different kinds of wells.

There is a short discussion about the trains that pass the Perez home. Transport of cattle and sheep in trucks began in the early 1950s. He recalls that he dealt with the Ilfeld Mercantile in Las Vegas, once managed by Governor Richard Dillon. He compares the Ilfeld Mercantile to a Wal-Mart. There was a bank, stores, lots of corrals, and a large scale – everything that you needed. The cattle and sheep were loaded on the Santa Fe Railroad and shipped to Kansas City.

Perez remembers the early days of Encino. He graduated from high school when he was sixteen years old. They discuss the county, and some of the small towns in the area, including of Rinconas [unable to verify name].

Perez has a concern for the future of the ranch and farmland in the area. He believes that rural areas are needed to produce food, but ranches are selling out and there are not any local workers.

Hispanic and other emigrants or whomever the ranchers can find are now doing the work. In the old days, there were farmers and ranches that grew crops and raised sheep and cattle. Water was from wells and rainfall. Drought drove early settlers away.

He recalls the drought of the 1930s, saying it was “nothing but dirt”. There was a lot more rainfall in the early days, but it became so dry that there was no feed for the animals. He believes that bacteria in the Great Lakes have caused drought.

He raises Rambouillet sheep. There were Merino sheep in Spain. The French wanted to get the Merino sheep but the Spaniards would not sell them any sheep, so they were always fighting over the sheep.

There is a brief discussion about World War II and the training of soldiers. Our soldiers are not being trained as well as they were in the 1940s. They are just being shipped out. He feels that the media is reporting false information now.

TAPE TWO, SIDE A:

He begins the tape by discussing the soldiers in Bosnia, South Korea, Hitler, Rommel and different battles around the world. He discusses the military units that he was in during World War II and the challenges that they faced. When he returned from the war, he worked the home ranch with his father. His father gave him his share of another ranch near Clines Corners. His father used to hire kids from neighboring communities to help him with the ranching, but most of these workers were fighting in the war.

His father would take 1,000 head of sheep. He talks about lambing time and the need to separate ewes with lambs and from the rest of the sheep so that they could bond. He says that there were constant battles between cattlemen and sheep herders for open range. Cattle would get into the water supply and contaminate it with their waste, thus making it impossible for the sheep to drink it. The sheep business began to change after World War II when younger people did not return to their hometowns.

TAPE TWO, SIDE B:

It was difficult to get labor after WWII. He suggests that immigrant labor had not yet come into the United States until the 1970s. Older or retired people were hired to build fences because there were not any young men to herd sheep. Net wire fencing was used. Fence holes were dug by hand. Once the fence was completed, the sheep could be released to wander. Water, feed and protection from predators were the only requirements needed for the care of the sheep. The original ranch was divided three ways after the death of his father. Perez ran the ranch during the latter days of his father’s life, and discusses how it was organized as a family corporation until his father died.

Perez talks about how bears were a problem for sheep ranchers. When given the choice to relocate a bear or to kill it, Perez chose to kill it. He is concerned about the release of the Mexican Grey Wolf in New Mexico and what that will do to the sheep rancher. He relates that in his father’s day, burros were poisoned with strychnine and left for the wolves to eat and thus kill them.

Perez now uses llamas to protect the sheep. Sheep numbers are going down because there is no market. Food is now coming from other countries that use more chemicals. Ships come with sheep and cattle from other countries such as Australia, and small sheep producers cannot compete with them. When Perez married, his father ran 4,000 sheep with approximately twelve workers. Today, Perez runs his operation with only his son as help.

TAPE THREE, SIDE A:

February 27, 2005 *Note:* Tape Three is a 90-minute tape.

Mrs. Perez discusses the awards that her granddaughter got from showing her lamb in state and county fairs. There is a short period of silence, as Mrs. Perez looks for a sewing pattern, followed by a discussion on Tinkerbelle, the lamb that their granddaughter showed at the fair.

The interviewer requests more information regarding Basque families in the area. Perez names several sheep ranchers who were here when Perez was a small child. He recalls that there were around twenty families that lived here and dispersed to Vaughn and other areas. He feels that they moved away to acquire more land for their growing families. There is a discussion of families and children who used to live in, or who still live in the area.

Encino means oak. Early settlers named places after the landscape in the area. Encino was the most active during the 1930s and mid-1940s. Encino had ten school buses. The discussion about the store and what it carried is revisited. Homesteaders and the remnants of their time in the area during the Depression are discussed. Most lived in dugouts. Electricity came to Encino first by a private electricity provider who ran a generator for the town. The electric co-op came in 1947-48. Prior to that time wind chargers were used. Appliances that ran on DC current were used, in addition to other appliances that ran on gas or propane. The cost of repairs for wind generators is discussed.

TAPE THREE, SIDE B:

The discussion of repairs continues. Seven-year droughts and rainfall are discussed. Perez feels that the problems are a result of atmospheric disturbances from changes in the earth. Other weather issues are discussed, in particular those that have affected the health of the sheep. Perez continues to talk about the early days in Encino.

Perez recalls several of the buildings and businesses in Encino when he was a child. Remnants of some of these buildings can be seen today. There was no movie theater in Encino in those days.

Cattle could only be kept on the rail for twenty-four hours before they needed to be unloaded for water. There were lots of corrals next to the railroad that were used for this purpose.

There is a brief discussion about articles that have been written about the Perez family and their sheep farming business. Pictures of the farm (before it was split) were taken by LIFE magazine in 1955. [NOTE: These pictures were apparently never published.] A discussion follows regarding these photos and the sheep blankets that were made for the sheep. Jewell Perez designed the blankets, and the Industries for the Blind in Albuquerque made the actual blankets. The blankets were put on the sheep in November and taken off in April when the sheep were sheared. The blankets were part of an experiment that Perez conducted to see if the blankets would keep the dirt from getting in the wool and rendering the wool unsuitable for market. Perez recalls that the experiment was intense and describes the processing and the results of the experiment.

TAPE FOUR, SIDE A:

The tape begins in the middle of a discussion regarding sending wool to the warehouse in Albuquerque. Wool from the western half of the state, including the wool from native sheep ranchers, went to this location. The warehouse closed in the late 1950s. The owner of the warehouse had advanced money to Indians and other sheep growers for approximately twenty-five cents a pound. That year the price of wool went to five cents a pound. After the Albuquerque warehouse closed, sheep were sent to Roswell Wool and Mohair, which was owned by the Goodwin brothers.

There is a brief discussion about the price of wool that Perez gets for his wool. He has sold it for as much as \$3.30 a pound "on the grease" (right off the sheep). The reason he gets such a good price for his wool is because he puts blankets on the sheep, thus keeping the wool cleaner and of a higher quality. Perez discusses the sheep blankets and that they do not use the blankets today because now the blankets cost more than the price that he would get for the wool. In the early days of using the blankets, Mrs. Perez would repair them and set them aside for the next use. After twenty years Perez decided not to use the blankets, because the cost eventually is more than the profit. Perez supplements sheep feed with feed cubes and continues to supplement the sheep diet with protein until April.

Perez feels that he will probably only break even this year because of the costs involved in the operation of the ranch (vehicles, fuel, labor, and taxes). There are times when he has had to liquidate animals. He has also leased land for steers during drought times to generate more income.

Perez states that the real problem with the sheep industry now is that imports are bringing in wool cheaper than American farmers can produce it. It is more cost effective to do business outside of the United States. Ten years ago, there were seventy-five million head of sheep in the United States. Today there are six million head of sheep. As a result, everyone was selling their sheep because they could not afford to raise them.

Perez reads an article in a newspaper from San Angelo, Tex., which tells about the closing of a lamb slaughterhouse; they now must go to Colorado for slaughter. Sheep ranchers are now beginning to sell their land because they cannot afford to keep the ranches going. Ranchers need at least five dollars a pound for the wool and two or three dollars a pound for the lamb to stay in business. It is his opinion that we are doing nothing but building the foreigners up. Agriculture cannot survive in this country when everything is coming in from other countries. He continues to voice his opinions on this subject.

TAPE FOUR, SIDE B:

The tape continues the discussion on importing sheep products from other countries and the politics surrounding it. Perez sheep mostly go to the fields in California and some to Arizona. In Arizona the land is being taken over by golf courses and housing developments. There is a slaughterhouse in Dixon, Calif., so many of the Perez lambs go there. There are seven states that consume the lamb in the United States, all in the area around Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York. As newer generations come into families, the eating habits change so not as much lamb is being eaten as it was years ago.

The interviewer takes an inventory of items that can be copied and returned, and items that can be kept by the Museum. Perez briefly revisits the discussion on importing sheep. He remarks that

Australian lamb has a strong taste and smell. The inventory continues. The sheep blankets are discussed again, as well as the LIFE photographs that were taken in the 1950s. Final comments from Perez and his wife are given on various topics that were already discussed.