



ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
INTERVIEW ABSTRACT

CONSULTANT: J. Phelps White III

DATE OF BIRTH: July 1, 1932 GENDER: Male

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: May 1, 1996 / June 13, 2000

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Consultant's office, Roswell, N.M.

INTERVIEWER: Jane O'Cain / Marcie Palmer

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM

TRANSCRIBED: March 11, 1996 / September 25, 2000

NUMBER OF TAPES: Three

ABTRACTOR: Ann McBeth/ Marcie Palmer

DATE ABSTRATED: October 10, 2000

QUALITY OF RECORDING (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Details the history of the Littlefield and White families and the establishment of farms and ranches in Eastern New Mexico. Includes personal history and his association with the founding of the Farm & Ranch Heritage Museum. Tape Three is a discussion of prisoner of war labor on consultant's family's ranch and farm during World War II.

DATE RANGE: 1882-1996

ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

[**PROGRAM NOTE:** Mr. White was originally interviewed in 1996 on two tapes as part of the Founders project. The Museum visited with him again (Tape Three) during the POWs in New Mexico Agriculture research project four years later.]

TAPE ONE, SIDE A:

J. Phelps White III was born in Roswell, N.M. His great-grandfather, J. Phelps White, was a nephew of Major George Littlefield, and accompanied him to New Mexico in 1882. Littlefield, pioneer cattleman and Civil War veteran, migrated from Texas to buy and market wild cattle. They located their first cattle operation in Old Tascosa. By 1882 the railroad had arrived and driving cattle to market was no longer necessary so they moved their operation to the Bosque Grande Ranch north of Roswell on the Pecos River.

J. Phelps White (Sr.) and his brother became partners with Littlefield and set up the earliest windmills to pump water. They bought farmland near Roswell and established huge irrigation systems for the four streams (later artesian wells). Apples, small grains, and alfalfa were early crops. Farming supplemented ranching. In 1927 the grandfather purchased the L-E Ranch, from the J. J. Hagerman estate.

J. Phelps White, Jr., eldest child was born 1904, sister Zoa was born in 1906, and twin bothers were born in 1908-09.

J. Phelps White III's great-grandfather, Thomas Jefferson White, became nephew of George W. Littlefield by way of his mother's second marriage to Flemming Littlefield. The Littlefields migrated to Texas; they were early pioneers after the Alamo fell to Mexico.

Consultant's paternal grandmother, Lute Tomlinson, came from Ft. Worth; her father had been a contractor. His parents were married in 1927 and his mother's maiden name was Beers. Mr. Beers migrated from Alabama to Bryan, Texas in the early days of cotton farming and was an extension agent with the Department of Agriculture.

A visit to Mobile, Ala., in 1996 confirmed family connections to John Bragg, a judge in Mobile, his brother, General Braxton Bragg of the Confederate Army, and a second brother, Thomas Bragg, who served both as Attorney General of the Confederacy and as governor of North Carolina.

A discussion of the origination of the XIT Ranch and its dispersal in about 1900 followed. Littlefield bought the south end, known as Yellow House Division, and J. Phelps White was a partner. Littlefield recognized the importance of railroads for cattle shipment and promoted railroad construction.

Littlefield's endeavors included establishment of The American National Bank in Austin, Texas and other successful businesses. He was a major benefactor to the University of Texas. The White-Littlefield partnership was strong and profitable. White represented Littlefield in all cattle dealings.

A question about the Taylor Grazing Act brought forth a discussion of Texas law regarding federal lands. The consultant's father bought the Diamond A Ranch, a first venture into sheep raising. The ranch was purchased at the time of Pearl Harbor; J. Phelps White III acquired his portion in the 1950s and operated it until 1978 when it was sold to R. O. Anderson.

TAPE ONE, SIDE B:

White has not had problems with the Taylor Grazing Act but thinks the Bureau of Land Management should “lean on these ranchers more for range management and range protection.” He graduated from college in 1955, spent two years in the U. S. Army, and was helped by his father to establish his own ranching business. J. Phelps White III, his wife and son, lived in town; he divided his time between his ranch and his father’s ranch.

White has three children: a son in the oil business in Roswell, a daughter living in Houston, Texas, and youngest daughter who lives in Singapore. His parents never forced him to do anything, but he was active in ranch life and business in the summer and school breaks; he never lived on a ranch.

Sheep ranching, as a primary operation, began about 1957, but a purchase of cattle later made the ranch a combination cattle and sheep ranching operations. Most ranchers in the Roswell area still have sheep; the area is mostly predator free since the coyotes became controlled in the twenties.

White attended public schools in Roswell as well as five years at New Mexico Military Institute (NMMI). Former Institute president, General Hugh Milton, dreamed of NMMI becoming a preparatory school for diplomats. It was a four-year college for a while, but has returned to being a junior college. NMMI commissions more second lieutenants than any other school except West Point. The school is wealthy because it is on the richest land in New Mexico; it received millions of dollars from state trust lands funds.

The local museum is housed in his grandparents’ home, which was built by his grandmother’s father, a contractor. Minor Huffman, a local resident, encouraged the White heirs to give the home to the community for an historical museum. It is now owned by the Historical Center for Southeastern New Mexico.

The Wool Growers Association had Floyd Lee, a prominent New Mexican sheep rancher, as a leader and underwriter for many years. Lee, A. D. Brownfield, J. P. White Jr., and Albert Mitchell were instrumental in instituting the Taylor Grazing Act in New Mexico. The Wool Growers Association owned *The New Mexico Stockmen* and their major lobbying effort was to continue access to public lands for agricultural use.

The first efforts to establish the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Museum were primarily the collaborative effort of Dr. Gerald Thomas and Dr. Bill Stephens. There were meetings, and original ideas were for a collection of family papers, artifacts, and the promotion of agriculture. Consultants were brought in for a meeting. They told of the importance to expand the thrust of the endeavor to include the public at large, and received the acceptance and approval of the early board. At this point, the direction of the Museum changed to include the history and artifacts of the past, as well as an understanding of new technology. Education of the public about environmental concerns, and the impact of agriculture became goals.

Ft. Stanton in Lincoln, N.M. was discussed as a possible site with emphasis on the history of the horse. Negotiation of locating close to the New Mexico State University campus was promoted. J. Phelps White III resigned from the board at this time because he was asked to endorse a note of funds, a process he could not do in clear conscience.

The location of the Museum was decided; the groundbreaking ceremony was memorable and moving, and the Museum was placed under the Office of Cultural Affairs in order to raise finances through the New Mexico legislature. Fundraising consultants from Texas were brought in – may have been the reason to borrow money from individuals to pay these expenses. These consultants suggested dividing the state into different areas for fund raising.

TAPE TWO, SIDE A:

Fundraising efforts benefited from the technical support of the Office of Cultural Affairs. White says the mission of the Museum to educate the community at large should be divided into two or three areas. Agriculture needs to tell the story of its past and its future. Agricultural lands provide a large tax base that benefits local communities. Environmental and conservation concerns must become agriculture's concerns.

Subdivision development of croplands is a major concern. Presently, there are 80,000 domestic wells in the state. Water rights are a given to landowners with as little as five acres of land. The existing source of water is being depleted, and contamination of ground water with increased use of septic tanks is a real danger.

Education is vital. Government money for subsidies has resulted in lower food prices. If support programs are removed, only big operators will be in control of the market. Interview finishes with a request for names of people to contact for further information.

TAPE TWO, SIDE B: Blank

TAPE THREE, SIDE A:

Phelps White III was nine years old when the war started. His father used prisoners of war (German) labor from the camp at Orchard Park, Roswell, New Mexico. He remembered three incidents.

At Christmas one year his father offered each prisoner a goose from his flock. The next spring there were no baby geese. (Geese mate for life. When the POWs chose a goose all the pairs were separated.) Prisoners of war worked on the White's farm west of Roswell (the old Diamond A Ranch). One prisoner tried to escape but did not get away.

Consultant and a friend went out to their farm east of town to shoot their new BB guns. They saw two prisoners stacking hay in the barn. "All of a sudden that barn was on fire." The barn burned to the ground. White did enjoy going to the farms with his father to see the German prisoners of war work.

TAPE THREE, SIDE B: Blank

