

**NEW MEXICO  
FARM & RANCH  
HERITAGE  
MUSEUM**

**ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM  
INTERVIEW ABSTRACT**

CONSULTANT: Linda Davis

DATE OF BIRTH: July 11, 1930 Sex: Female

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: May 14, 1996

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Old Mill Museum, Cimarron, NM

INTERVIEWER: Jane O'Cain

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

TRANSCRIBED: Yes: August 5, 1996

NUMBER OF TAPES: Three

ABTRACTOR: Sylvia Wheeler

DATE ABSTRATED: February 2, 2001

QUALITY OF RECORDING (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: The first part of the interview deals with personal and family history. Her mother was a pioneer public health nurse in New Mexico. Her father was Albert Mitchell, ranch and manager of the Bell Ranch. The last half of the interview details the consultant's role in the founding of the New Mexico Farm & Ranch Heritage Museum.

DATE RANGE: 1870s-1996

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

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

Jane O’Cain with the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum interviews Mrs. Linda Davis on May 14, 1966, at the Old Mill Museum in Cimarron, New Mexico. Linda Davis is a member of the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Foundation.

Davis was born in Denver, Colorado on July 11, 1930. She was the second child and had two brothers. The consultant states that her mother was the first public health nurse in New Mexico. She was born in Las Vegas (in 1898). Davis’s mother’s parents were Norwegian immigrants to the United States. Her grandfather, Sundt, came to New Mexico in the early 1870s, because he had asthma, and found that the climate helped him. When he moved to New Mexico the railroad ended in Las Vegas, and so that is where he lived. Sundt helped build many of the beautiful old homes in Las Vegas.

The consultant’s mother received a degree in nursing in 1922, and came to New Mexico. A state public health department had not yet been established; however, the state received funding from the Shepherd-Towner Public Health Grant to provide public health services. In 1922, her mother checked every public school child in New Mexico, giving each a health examination. She rode horseback, and drove an old Ford car.

Davis says: “They had no paved roads, she rode, she was a very fine horsewoman. And she was tiny; she wore a four quad-A shoe. She was such a fantastic lady on burros. We had a great deal of polio on the Navajo reservation in those days . . . She was the one who made them exercise their limbs with hot water so they didn’t wither away. My mother would teach them. She used big soap kettles that everybody had, build a fire and heat the water, put their wool blankets in it and then wrap the children and force them to exercise. She was almost a legend in the Navajo country for what she’d done to try and help rehabilitate some of these children. I have a few letters and things of hers. She died in 1934 when I was just four years old.”

Davis goes on to discuss her mother’s family: “ She had eleven siblings. Her brothers went to West Point. And all of the girls in her family had a degree of some kind. An immigrant family from Norway within the space of a generation had all their children college educated.”

Davis’s father was Albert Knell Mitchell, a legendary figure in New Mexico’s cattle industry. Mitchell’s mother’s father had been a professor of education at Heidelberg University in Germany, and was hired in 1850 to come to Cincinnati to establish the public school system. In the early 1870s, he developed tuberculosis, and the doctors told him to go west or die.

“He came to the end of the railroad, which apparently in that day and age was in Kansas somewhere and bought a buckboard, a team of horses, and kept on coming west and got to this area . . . he found out where the Panhandle post offices were . . . and he’d be at these post offices when the mail came in, and he would read letters . . . He would write letters in response, and in those days they let the educated people write legal [documents]. . . He carried some books with him. . . If he found people that could read, he would leave a book or almost a traveling library, ’cause he’d come back later after they’d read it and pick it up. And they’d give him a pound of butter, a chicken, a dozen eggs, some meat or ask him to have dinner with them . . . He was a single man who had left his wife and two daughters in Cincinnati because this was no place for women. He had his son with him, and I think the son was probably a boy of about twelve . . . and my grandfather was teaching him the whole time. He taught all of his children. Well, he

finally got a [job at a] post office . . . just below Conchas . . . Dam, . . . called La Cinta. . . . [Later] he found a postmaster position at the little town of Tequesquite, which is now Albert.”

Davis says her great-grandfather established a little store along with the post office and kept many books on hand. He brought his wife and two girls out to New Mexico and taught all of his children. Later his son Albert, who was about twenty years of age, was killed on night herd; he had become a cowboy. He died of a head injury, which was seldom survived in those days; it was a two-day ride to the doctor.

Her father’s paternal grandfather abandoned his wife and family at the Cripple Creek silver mines in Colorado. Her grandfather was twelve at the time and went to work as a cowboy. He became a legendary foreman on the big ranches in southern Colorado around Herfano Butte. His name was Thomas Edward (T.E.) Mitchell. Later, in his twenties, he became the manager of the Bar T Cross Ranch. Bar T Cross headquarters were at Tequesquite, New Mexico.

She continues discussing her father’s family: “They said the family was well educated, speaking three languages and that they were educated at the ranch. My dad was in junior high school when he went away to school. My dad spoke Spanish, German, and English as did his sisters. He was born in 1894, four years older than my mother. They were married when she was thirty. My dad didn’t approve of anybody that got married too young; they had to know what they were doing first.”

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

Davis’s mother died when she was four, her brother next to her in age was two, and she had an infant brother. Because her grandmother wasn’t able to care for all three children, Davis was sent to the Bell Ranch to stay with her father; he was managing both the Bell Ranch and the Trig Ranch at the time. “When I went over there, I spent most of my time with the wagon crew on the Bell when the wagon was out. I had a copy of *Peter Rabbit* and you can imagine the cowboys got tired of reading *Peter Rabbit*. The cowboys carried reading material, lightweight, that would fold easily, so they each carried a copy of *Ranch Romances*, about as thick as the standard comic book with big print and nice illustrations and the hero cowboy always won the lovely lady. They were very conservative stories but they’d each carry a copy and exchange them. With a crew of twenty to twenty-five men there was plenty of reading material. When I later got my education at the Calvert school system out of Baltimore, MD. a correspondence course sent to missionary children and children of Canadian Mounties, remote areas, I could read and the school books were tame.”

She continues to describe her childhood: “I rode with the men; my grandfather had me riding before I can remember. In the winter when they’d break the horses, they had two wonderful horsebreakers who would take me with them in the morning. They would top-off a bronc and when they got some control of him, they’d come by and grab me of the fence and put me in front of ’em. I’d kick the horse with my heels until he bucked again. They were wonderful riders, Tod Moore and Buster Taylor.”

Many of the ranches in the area sold horses to the army: “. . . the Army would come in purchase the best ones to provide horses for the cavalry.” They also sold horses destined for the Philippines because the United States was responsible for mounting the soldiers in the Philippines and other U.S. territories in the Caribbean.

Polo became a “craze that swept the country after the First World War when people had some money.” The Bell Ranch was owned by the Red River Valley Company; the board of directors were mostly Yale graduates and some of the best polo players in the United States. Polo horses, range mare and Thoroughbred stallion crosses, were shipped from northeastern New Mexico ranches to the Eastern states, Chicago, and St. Louis.

During the Depression, the remounts sold to the army were a good source of income. The price of cattle was low and there was no moisture and no grass. Many of the ranches shipped cattle to Mexico because pasture good conditions were better.

Her brothers were Thomas Edward and Albert Julian. The children were educated at home until Davis was in the fifth grade (1941), then she and Albert (Thomas had died of leukemia) went to Albuquerque and attended the Manzano Day School. On December 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor Day, their lives greatly changed. At the ranch the hands were drafted into the military and work crews were depleted. Because ranchers were declared essential to the war effort, Davis and her brother were let out of school, sometimes for three days during the week, to help on the ranch.

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

Later in the war years Davis started attending Sandia Girls' School in Santa Fe. One day in March the girls were in study hall out on the sun porch, the glass in the windows bowed out and the students heard a boom, and a whump. The windows of the study hall popped out and desks were picked up and moved. Nobody was hurt. At supper that evening a man came in; he was dressed in a tan trench coat, tan slacks, and fedora. Mrs. Moore, the head of the school, made the following announcement: the students were to say nothing of what happened that afternoon. Nobody talked about any of it. Later that summer the first atomic bomb was tested in southern New Mexico.

When the Sandia School was moved to Arizona, Davis was sent to the Ethel Walker School in Simsbury, Connecticut. (She graduated from high school in 1949.) From there she went to Cornell, though her dad was opposed to it. He had graduated from Cornell, and felt there was a prejudice against women there. However, she found Cornell "wonderful." While Davis was at Cornell, her grandmother lost much of her sight and needed someone to take care of her. She stayed in New Mexico and ran the ranch for a year. She married her husband, Les Davis in 1953, and consequently did not complete her undergraduate degree. She and her husband ranch on the CS Ranch in Colfax County.

Davis and her husband have six children, four boys and two girls. They all are involved in ranching; her grandchildren are the sixth generation to ranch in the area. Frank Springer established the CS Cattle Company in 1873. Springer and his roommate at the University of Iowa, William Morley, surveyed the railroad track across Raton Pass. Springer also became manager of the Maxwell land grant for a time and then became the lawyer for the owners of the grant.

At this point the interview was focused on the founding of the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum (hereafter Museum). Davis discussed a meeting she attended in December of 1985 or 1987. Attendees included Alvin Stockton, Mary Moore, Bill Stephens, Davis and others. Bill Stephens felt that there was statewide interest in an agricultural museum and the group established a foundation.

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

Bill McIlhaney was the first president of the Heritage Foundation; Davis was the first secretary. The Foundation had a strong support in Carlsbad and Roswell, but not in the Four Corners area. G.X. McSherry carried the bill in the Legislature to establish the Museum. The Legislature appropriated money for the Museum, but only if the Foundation could provide matching funds.

**TAPE THREE, SIDE A:**

The initial vision for the Museum was to show the impact of agriculture on New Mexico, and to demonstrate the unique aspects of New Mexico agriculture because of the state's location, climate, and mix of cultures. They didn't want a Museum that simply displayed farm implements. The Foundation wanted the Museum to be free of political influence.

Many Foundation members believed that Las Cruces should be the setting for the Museum, but the city of Las Cruces was not responsive and it was distant from other communities. Many were happy with the Museum's site on Dripping Spring Road in Las Cruces. New Mexico State University and their trustees were helpful in the establishment of the Museum. Davis is pleased with the site, the available space, and the view of the Organ Mountains.