

**NEW MEXICO  
FARM & RANCH  
HERITAGE  
MUSEUM**

**ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

INTERVIEW ABSTRACT

CONSULTANT: Irving Porter

DATE OF BIRTH: February 7, 1925 GENDER: Male

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: October 9, 2009

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Consultant's home in Piñon, N.M.

INTERVIEWER: Donna M. Wojcik

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMFRHM

TRANSCRIBED: December 2, 2010

NUMBER OF TAPES: Two

ABTRACTOR: Donna M. Wojcik

DATE ABSTRACTED: October 20, 2009

RECORDING QUALITY (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Consultant was raised at, and worked on the John Prather ranch during the stand-off with the Army over the land-grab of ranches for expansion of White Sands Missile Range in 1957.

DATE RANGE: 1925–2009

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

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

The interview begins with background information on the consultant. When he was eleven years old, he was taken in by John Prather's brother Owen and lived in Piñon, N.M. Although not a blood relative to the Prathers, he recalls that he spent as much time at John Prather's ranch. He describes it as heaven—"an oasis in the middle of the desert." When he was seventeen, he went to work for John Prather at the ranch breaking horses. "I learned everything about horses from John," he says.

The Prather family's move from Van Zandt County, Tex., is described, as well as information about the ranch started on the Agua Chiquita [near Weed, N.M.] When the livestock outgrew the area, Prather decided to move to the "flats," the current site of his ranch.

Porter describes Prather as having "a great sense of humor after he got to know you, and he loved to tell stories." He tells the story of the ten-year-old Prather who acquired a pistol and shot a jackrabbit as it slept. Porter says that most people thought Prather was terribly stern.

Porter tells of Prather's ranch acquisition, which began with a homestead on a "school section" of land. Prather's father built the home where the famous stand-off took place.

Prather raised cattle, horses, and mules and was known as the "Mule King." Although the ranch did not have any naturally occurring water sources, Prather dug a well and installed a tank. The canyon located near the ranch headquarters drained lots of runoff to the ranch, so Prather never had any problems with water. He had a five-acre orchard that produced peaches, apples, grapes, and other fruit. At the time the ranch was developed, the Sacramento River was running, and Prather did not need to use his well. However, the water from the river was being sold to the railroad in Orogrande, and the river eventually dried up. Prather had to use the well, pump, and tank.

Porter says that a lot of ranchers in the area homesteaded one section of land, but after they had proved up on it, they gave it up because they could not make a living on such a small amount of land. Prather then bought that land. At the time of the land-grab, Prather had eight sections [5,120 acres] of patented land that the Army wanted to take away from him. He had the largest ranch of anyone in the area.

Events surrounding the land-grab are discussed. Porter states that Prather was "a thorn in [the Army's] side. He recalls that once the Army had control of Prather's land [after his death in 1965] they leveled the home and other structures. At one point, Porter recalls, Prather offered to lease the land to the Army for \$1 per year for 99 years if they would just leave him alone. "But the Army was all powerful and they were literally gonna take the land," says Porter. He was not aware of Prather attending any meetings between the ranchers and the Army, nor is he aware of meetings being held that the ranchers did not know about.

Porter said after the condemnation hearing in Albuquerque in 1956, the ranchers were on their own. The Governor did not help the ranchers. The Army stated that there was an urgent need for land. The Engle Bill, passed in 1958, stated that "Congressional approval was necessary for withdrawal of tracts containing more than 5,000 acres." Porter says that by this time the Army had already taken the land. He believes that the deal Prather offered the Army [\$1 per year for 99 years] would have worked out perfectly. He believes that the Army exaggerated the dangers and says that he never saw anything dangerous. Prather always felt that there was no danger.

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

The days leading up to the stand-off are discussed. At one point, two U. S. Marshals and a civilian were sent to move Prather off the ranch. After refusing to leave, Prather went into the house. The marshals went to Orogrande where they called their contact, saying that they were afraid to fool with Prather because they were afraid he would die, resulting in bad publicity. They were told to leave Prather alone.

When Porter heard that the Army was going to the ranch to physically carry Prather off the ranch, friends of Prather showed their support by going out to the ranch headquarters to help Prather. Porter tells the story of a man in a car who kept coming out to ranch, saying that he was lost. He believes that this man was sent by the Army to spy on them. When food supplies at the ranch were low, someone was dispatched to Alamogordo to buy food. Porter says there were approximately sixty people at headquarters at that time.

It is Porter's belief that the way the Army did things was unnecessary. They made offers, which Prather quickly rejected. He tells the story of the day that the Army showed up with tanks, armored vehicles, cannons, and machine guns to run off "one old man." He says that Prather made them look foolish.

Prather was very adamant about wanting to keep the ranch to be held together and left to his heirs. Porter finds it ironic that the Army sent out a group of representatives to attend Prather's funeral, especially after everything they did to Prather.

Porter says that Prather was not a violent man. Pictures in the newspaper showing Prather holding a gun were staged at the request of the reporters. Prather did carry a pocket knife, but Porter says that Prather would never have taken to that kind of violence. He states that Prather was good at using the power of free speech.

In the end, the Army granted Prather 13 acres of land around the headquarters for use as long as he lived and erected signs to that effect. Prather retaliated by posting his own signs.

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

The discussion of the signs continues. Porter states that Prather believed in what he fought for, but when he died there was nothing more he could do about it.

At one point, the Army gave Prather a check to compensate for the land that they were going to take from him. Prather continued to send that check back and refused to cash it. Porter does not know what happened to that money.

Prather is buried under a pecan tree at the homestead site. The Bureau of Land Management created a water line from a tank to the grave site so that the tree and desert flowers around the grave could be watered.

Rumors that Prather's dog was trained to bark at anyone in uniform are false; in fact Prather's dog did not even bark. Porter states that neighbors did not suffer cattle losses due to missiles. Prather taught him that the Army does not run our country and says that if the ranchers had known that the Army does not have rights above the government then they would have fought back. "The Army is not the government nor is the government the Army." He says that the ranchers were never paid enough to purchase land to replace what the Army had taken, while others were not compensated at all.

Prather's mule business is discussed, as is his generosity.

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

The discussion of Prather's generosity continues. Porter says that if Prather found that a child showed an interest in ranching, he would "cut" a heifer calf for him and brand it with one created just for the child. Any offspring of that heifer would be branded with the child's brand. Prather was conservative to the point of stingy, Porter says. He would do without lighting a fire as long as he could. Porter's wife, Lessie, believes that this was because wood was scarce in the flats.

Porter states that he can always tell if someone had really interviewed Prather. He says that Prather's vocabulary was exceptional, and that he would never have used the word "ain't." Prather "never took the Lord's name in vain." He recalls that there was once a lawsuit filed against Prather for cussing, but since no one had ever heard him swear the case was dismissed.

Prather's cattle are discussed. Porter describes an incident between Prather and a dishonest scale operator; he says that Prather fixed it so that the operator would never try to rip people off again.

The interview concludes with a brief discussion about Prather's grandson, Mike Gaba's interest in anything to do with Prather.