

**NEW MEXICO  
FARM & RANCH  
HERITAGE  
MUSEUM**

**ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM  
INTERVIEW ABSTRACT**

CONSULTANTS: Chester / Helen Walker

DATE OF BIRTH: August 12, 1919 / July 13, 1920 GENDER: Male/Female

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: October 13, 2000

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Walker residence, rural Carlsbad

INTERVIEWER: Jane O'Cain

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

TRANSCRIBED: Yes: April 26, 2001

NUMBER OF TAPES: One

ABTRACTOR: O'Cain

DATE ABSTRATED: May 2, 2001

QUALITY OF RECORDING (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Transportation of prisoners of war from Camp Orchard Park and Camp Carlsbad to area farmers during World War II (WWII). Transportation of laborers contracted through the Bracero Program following WWII and into the 1960s.

DATE RANGE: 1940s – 1960s

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

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

In 1944 the Walkers lived on a farm near Roswell where they raised predominantly cotton and alfalfa. After the prisoner of war (POW) camp was built, Walker was notified that there would be an opportunity to provide transportation for the POWs to local farms because he owned a 1941 Chevrolet truck with a sixteen-foot flat bed on it.

Discussion of area farmers who employed POWs. Walker was paid per trip by the farmers for transporting the POWs. He remembers there were four or five other trucks at the camp in the morning to pick up the POWs.

The POWs brought lunches and coffee with them. The consultants describe how food was wasted by the POWs.

Before the end of the war the POWs were not “required to pick any amount of cotton.” The consultants discuss how the POWs would play in the fields, for example, throwing cotton bolls at one another. To their knowledge the POWs did not refuse to pick because they wanted to get out of the camp. The farmers had to accept these behaviors, as there was no one else to harvest the cotton.

Walker transported the POWs about thirty-five miles. Before the war ended the POW work crew was attended by two guards. When the war ended guards no longer went to the fields with the POWs. Also, once the war was over a quota of 135 pounds of cotton per day was established for the POWs. This was not an unreasonable amount for the area as 350 to 400 pounds was the average.

The only time Walker had any problems with transporting the POWs was when he learned from a farmer that some of the POWs had been displaying a banner decorated with a swastika from the truck. The farmers threatened to shoot the banner out of their hands. Walker met with the camp commander and the problem was quickly solved. One POW gave Helen Walker two pencil drawings. His name was Rhienholt Stelljas.

Walker started transporting POWs from Roswell in 1943. In 1944 the Walkers moved to the Carlsbad area and then he transported POWs from Camp Carlsbad. On one occasion Helen Walker drove the truck to pick up the POWs and although she wasn't frightened, her father-in-law insisted on accompanying her.

The consultants believe the POWs here were treated well, because “we didn't want the circumstances to go back on our boys over there [Europe].”

A medic, an American soldier, accompanied the POWs to the field. The consultants only remember him treating one POW who was injured during a game of cotton boll toss.

When Chester didn't have to return home to work on his own farm during the day, he would wait at the farms while the POWs worked and weigh the cotton that had been picked.

Occasionally ministers or priests from town would visit the camps.

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

The farmers “traded out work” more frequently during the war than at present. No Mexican bracero workers were employed in the area during the war. After the war Walker had a contract to transport

braceros between El Paso and Loving. He could transport a hundred braceros at a time in a semi-trailer; however, this number was decreased as time went on and toward the end of the agreement the braceros had to be transported in a bus.

Helen Walker provided lunches for the braceros to eat during the time they were on the road. She purchased all of the food and recalls being paid seventy-five cents per lunch.

Walker remembers that one farm alone near Pecos, Texas required a thousand braceros a day for thirty days. The Pecos Valley was mechanized by the late 1960s.

Discussion of Harroun Farms near Carlsbad. Harroun Farms had a sharecropping arrangement with its workers, and Walker does not recall transporting POWs there. Harroun Farms had their own school, grocery store, and three hundred head of work mules that were provided to the sharecroppers.

After the war Helen Walker corresponded with former POW Stelljas. He sent her a harmonica, and she mailed him non-perishable food items. She cannot locate the letters she received from him.