



ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
INTERVIEW ABSTRACT

CONSULTANT: Ralph Hackey

DATE OF BIRTH: June 29, 1920 SEX: Male

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: September 6, 1996

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Hackey residence, rural Rincon

INTERVIEWER: Jane O'Cain

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM OTHER _____

TRANSCRIBED: Yes: January 20, 1998

NUMBER OF TAPES: Two

ABTRACTOR: Jane O'Cain

DATE ABSTRATED: November 20, 2000

QUALITY OF RECORDING (SPECIFY): Poor. The sound is very low.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Personal history and history of farming in the Mesilla Valley from 1923 to the present. Briefly discusses the consultant's involvement in the founding of the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum.

DATE RANGE: 1923-1996

ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

TAPE ONE, SIDE A:

Ralph Hackey was a “charter member” of the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Institute. He joined the board in 1985.

He was born in 1920 near Pecos, Texas, and moved with his parents to New Mexico in 1923. His parents had heard of “new land” being available in the Mesilla Valley. They ran a small dairy, and raised cotton and a few vegetables. It was “not very good ground and very unlevel.” They cleared the land with grubbing hoes and a shovel. In 1939, his father returned to Texas with his two youngest sons while Hackey remained behind to finish high school. His mother died when he was seven years old.

Hackey attended New Mexico State University and during his senior year of college, 1941, he was drafted into the military service. Since he had taken Civilian Pilot Training the previous summer he went into the Air Force, where he flew thirty-five missions over Germany. He was discharged from the service in October of 1945. On New Years Day 1946 he moved to the farm where he presently resides.

When his parents arrived in the valley the Elephant Butte Reservoir had only been completed seven years. It was difficult to “apply” the irrigation water because the land was so unlevel. The irrigation ditches were not cemented, “we had gopher holes on big ol’ hunks of the ditches wash out.” The “land was already salty,” and it was a problem to leach the salt out because the land was unlevel, “it’s hard to hold the water on it to leach it out.”

The Hackeys grubbed out tornillo mesquite bushes from their land with grubbing hoes and shovels.

When Hackey purchased his farm it was “very unlevel” and had “ol’ dirt [irrigation ditches].” He planted cotton the first year he owned the farm and did very well; in the spring cotton was selling for twenty-two cents a pound, but by fall it was selling for forty-eight cents a pound. He had 110 acres planted in cotton that year “we lucked out and made two bales to the acre.”

There were a few mechanical cotton harvesters in the valley by the mid-fifties. Prior to that, Hackey had about three or four families that harvested his cotton. Most were from Oklahoma, but he had one “Mexican” family, the sons of whom still work for him. The families from Oklahoma would work all fall at the farm. They had a house for the migrant workers. Hackey never used a “weigh box” during harvest, but instead told his workers “turn in your pounds.” He states, “I never did lose any weights at the gin . . . they were accurate and honest.”

The Hatch gin was a cooperative that was sold in about 1991 because it had begun to lose money. Now the farmers in the Hatch area have to haul their cotton to a gin in Las Cruces or Mesilla Park. For a period of time cotton was not grown as much in the area, and chile became the predominant crop. However, people are “rediscovering cotton” because chile wilt is becoming a problem, as is pink root with the onion crops.

It is becoming more common in the area to have cotton picked by custom harvesters that come mostly out of Texas. A four-row harvester costs about \$180,000.

In the Rio Grande Valley “water is the least of our expenses,” however, it is a significant cost at their ranch and farm they own in the Uvas Valley. There, water has to be pumped from underground wells.

The Hackeys now raise alfalfa and corn for silage. This feed is sold directly to a large dairy in the area.

As a child he milked cows before school and after. He believes he was ten or twelve when he started milking cows. The family owned about fifteen cows, and usually three family members milked each day. In the summer they turned the cows out on the irrigation canal to graze.

Hackey also worked for neighboring farmers hauling hay or hoeing cotton as a youngster. The first job he had was "turnin' cantaloupe vines." He worked two and a half days and earned \$1.10. With the money he bought a pair of denim pants (\$0.49) and a shirt (\$0.39) and had money left over for an ice cream cone. Later he worked hoeing cotton he was paid \$1.25 per day for a ten-hour day.

He discusses raising cantaloupe. It was labor intensive and the cantaloupes produced in the lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas came on the market before the cantaloupe produced here. Consequently, prices were depressed. Hackey describes the process of turning cantaloupe vines.

The consultant's university degree is in agriculture. He should have graduated in 1942, but because of the war he did not receive his diploma until 1953. While in college he worked at the cattle barns and then got the job as weatherman, "considered the best job on campus." He checked statistics for the airlines eight times a day and was paid a quarter each time.

TAPE ONE, SIDE B:

He describes several people who helped him get through college. He states "when I got out of grade school, there was no pressure to go to high school." So he did not attend school the first year, but eventually decided he better go. He got into livestock judging and was strongly encouraged by his agricultural teacher to attend college.

Hackey briefly describes his career as a pilot flying missions over Germany during World War II. In the thirty-five missions he flew, none of the crew were ever hit. He would have loved to continue to fly after leaving the service, but there were "thousands and thousands" of pilots after the war, all vying for a few jobs in the aviation field.

In 1946, he purchased his farm, 110 acres of farmland and a hundred acres of "hill land," for \$27,500. (Nowadays he believes it would be impossible to get into farming unless someone was willing to back you or unless you inherited the farm. It is somewhat easier to get into ranching because the cost of equipment is not so prohibitive.) At his place in the Uvas Valley most of the farm and ranch is comprised of state and federal leased land. In addition to about a thousand acres of farmland, he also raises about 550 cows. He was mostly interested in the place at Uvas because of the farmland; he is not a "dyed-in-the-wool rancher." He purchased the deeded land at Uvas in 1966.

In 1995, the Hackeys were named the Farm and Livestock Bureau's Farm Family of the Year. Hackey lists the various committees and boards he has served on. He states that the money he spends to support the New Mexico Farm and Livestock Bureau's lobbying efforts is "the best money I've spent on my farm."

He does not use the services of the extension service as much as he did in the past. He now hires a crop consultant who advises on when to apply water and "when to spray."

In discussing the founding of the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum (NMF&RHM), Hackey states that he first heard the idea discussed at a meeting of the Farm and Livestock Bureau. He assisted with fund raising. He was interested in the project because he believed "people were losing

history.” He again discusses the difficulty of fund raising, and states it was personally difficult for him to ask people for money.

TAPE TWO, SIDE A:

Some of the reluctance that people expressed in giving money was that there wasn't a building or anything “they could see.” Fund raising was difficult both locally and statewide. They approached the legislature at a time when “they had some extra money.” And tried to make the case that most of the museums in the state were located in Santa Fe and Albuquerque, and the southern part of the state was underrepresented.

He credits G. X. McSherry of Deming for the role he played in getting the bill to establish the museum through the legislature. He believes that the plan to place the NMF&RHM under the Office of Cultural Affairs was undertaken in part to gain more credibility with the legislature.

He believes that the biggest challenge faced by the NMF&RHM in the near future will be in securing finances. He states, “it's goin'a take time for people to know about it.”

The interview is concluded with Mr. and Mrs. Hackey suggesting other individuals to interview for the oral history program.

TAPE TWO, SIDE B: Blank