



ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
INTERVIEW ABSTRACT

CONSULTANT: Claud Tharp

DATE OF BIRTH: April 8, 1905 GENDER: Male

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: May 30, June 11, and June 26, 1997

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Rountree Cotton Company, Las Cruces, New Mexico

INTERVIEWER: Jane O'Cain

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM__x_OTHER_____

TRANSCRIBED: Yes: November 8, 1999

NUMBER OF TAPES: Four

ABTRACTOR: O'Cain

DATE ABSTRATED: January 25, 2001

QUALITY OF RECORDING (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: The cotton business in Las Cruces from 1927-1997

DATE RANGE: 1905-1997

ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

TAPE ONE, SIDE A:

The consultant was born in Paris, Lamar County, Texas, April 8, 1905. He was the oldest of nine children. His parents were farmers and raised cotton and corn. When he was seven years old he picked 110 bales of cotton, and an article was written about it in the *Kansas City Star*. He attended a rural school through grade seven. He was unable to attend high school as the family lived seven miles from the nearest town. As the oldest child in the family, he encouraged and assisted his younger siblings to get a high school education.

His maternal uncle moved to Arizona in 1920 or 1921 for health reasons. Cotton was just being experimented with in the West at that time. His uncle encouraged Tharp to take a six-week cotton-classing course at the Paris Commercial College. Tharp did so, and then moved to Tucson in 1926. (He describes cotton classing and some varieties of cotton). Tharp first worked in Las Cruces in 1927 and 1928, but lived in El Paso with his uncle. He moved to Las Cruces in 1929 when he took a job with a cotton firm, Farmers' Cotton Corporation. That company "quit the cotton business" in two years, and he then went to work for Anderson, Clayton and Company out of Houston, "the largest firm at that time in the United States." He worked for them for five years in Hudspeth County, Texas. Finally, in 1937, he returned to Las Cruces to run his uncle's cotton buying business, Rountree Cotton Company.

When he first went into the business with his uncle there were more cotton farmers in the Mesilla Valley than there are now because the farms were smaller. Some of the farmers came from Texas, North and South Carolina, and Mississippi. Many became dissatisfied after a "couple of years" and would sell their farms and leave. He states, "the land that we own used to be eight or ten people owned that land and now there's just us."

Most people who came to the Mesilla Valley knew how to grow cotton. Tharp grew the first pima cotton in the Mesilla Valley from seed he obtained in Arizona. He had to have his first crop ginned in Arizona, however it wasn't long, once the acreage planted in pima increased, that gins capable of ginning long staple cotton were built here.

Tharp explained that Rountree Cotton Company also did some farmer financing in the early days. He says, the "banks did very little" financing at the time. Usually a farmer would only need to borrow \$2000 to \$3000 to put in their crops (in comparison, in 1997 a farmer would need about \$300,000 to put in 500 acres of cotton). In the 1930s cotton was worth up to seven cents a pound (in 1997 pima cotton sold for \$1.10 - \$1.12 a pound and short staple cotton sold for \$0.75-\$0.80 a pound).

Rountree Cotton Company also owned compresses and cotton storage yards. They would ship to the mills year around, as the mills had need for more cotton.

Capital was needed for building and maintaining the gin, compressors, and cotton storage facilities. Although there were only two banks in Las Cruces, First National and the Mesilla Valley Bank, Tharp "never had any particular trouble, seem like, with getting money." In fact, his banker approached him about buying the first farmland that he purchased.

In the early days of Rountree Cotton Company they bought cotton from farmers all year around. He states “. . . a lot of the Spanish [Hispanic] people . . . didn't do any banking. In other words, if he made ten bales of cotton, or fifteen, he may... set 'em in his barn. When he needed some money, he'd come by the office and say, "I'm bringing you in a bale of cotton. What can you pay me today?"” Although much has changed, Rountree Cotton Company still finances some farmers on contract.

When cotton was picked by hand the harvest would start around September first. The mills would come to the area in the summer and decided how much cotton they would buy.

TAPE ONE, SIDE B:

The mills buy cotton according to grade from strict middling and down. They want cotton that is clean so they don't have to put it through the gin several times. Some of the lesser grades are good for products like denim and duck. Tharp still uses the same mills that he used forty-five to fifty years ago. Most of the mills are located in the Southern states.

The mills initially did not want to purchase irrigated cotton. Irrigated cotton is grown in California, Arizona, New Mexico, and a little is grown around El Paso, Texas. The dry land cotton has a shorter staple and is less expensive to buy than irrigated long staple cotton. When long staple cotton was first being produced the mills would take a railroad car (a hundred bales) of it in order to experiment with it. (In those days cotton was largely shipped by rail, now it is transported by truck.)

TAPE TWO, SIDE A:

The cotton-buying season is from October to March, and that's when Rountree Cotton Company needs the most labor. Year around they employ four to six people, during those months an additional two to four employees are hired. The need for labor has stayed about the same since the 1930s.

The federal government classes all cotton grown in the United States, and provides them with the classifications (grade and staple). Previously, their cotton was classed in El Paso.

He believes that the need for labor will remain about the same. He states, “I don't know how the government can change it (laughs).” But then goes on to state that the farmers “vote on these [farm] programs,” and that the farm programs can be changed “to kind of suit the farmer.”

World War II did not have a major impact on their business. Roosevelt's farm program in the 1930s centered on establishing the classing of cotton and setting price supports for cotton. These farm programs were quite small until the 1950s and 1960s.

New Mexico cotton is somewhat disadvantaged because of the cost of transporting it to the mills.

Discusses the federal government's loan guarantee program. Most farmers participate in the program, although there are a few growing “wild cotton.” When there is a drop in the cotton market, “all the cotton would go into the loan.” He stated that in 1992-1993 a lot of cotton went into the loan program, the farmers “couldn't sell it for enough to pay the government back.” The cotton in the loan program was held in warehouses, because there was no need for it. The mills do not like to mix cotton harvested in more

than one year.

The cotton market is most sensitive to the supply of cotton. In the United States four to five hundred thousand bales of long staple cotton are produced and fourteen to sixteen million bales of short staple cotton. Our markets can be impacted if mills in foreign countries buy our cotton, and then ship their product back to the United States and under sell domestic mills. In the United States, larger mills are purchasing many smaller mills.

Discusses the development of cotton varieties at New Mexico State University. Dr. Stroman was the cotton researcher at that time. As cottonseed was developed, farmers would be given some of it to plant in their own fields. Most cotton varieties are developed through the university systems, although occasionally a farm will develop a variety.

To a large extent the amount of cotton that can be produced per acre is dependent upon decisions the farmer makes, such as use of fertilizer, leveling of the land, and crop rotation. The Tharps rotate their crops every two years, alternating corn, milo, or alfalfa with cotton and chile.

The researchers at New Mexico State University continue to work to improve the “strength and length” of cotton.

Began to discuss the boll weevil and pink bollworm threat to New Mexico cotton.

TAPE TWO, SIDE B:

Continues to discuss the pink bollworm and boll weevil. Tharp remembers that when he was growing up in Texas from 1915 to 1920 the boll weevils nearly destroyed the cotton crop. Sometimes a cold winter will slow the weevil infestation; however, it is very important to keep your fields and adjacent areas very clean to deny the weevil and worm an opportunity to “hibernate” over the winter months. He describes his father’s largely unsuccessful attempts to control the boll weevil when he was farming in Texas.

Tharp describes the change in the Mesilla Valley from smaller farms to large farms. The main factor in this transformation is the mechanization of agriculture after World War II.

During World War II the Tharps utilized German prisoners of war to harvest their cotton. They also utilized labor through the bracero program. Although the regulations for this program were specific, he states many farmers “. . . didn’t pay any attention to ’em much . . . because they couldn’t afford to do it. And the laborers didn’t complain, because if they did they’d say, ‘Well, go get you a job someplace else.’” He discusses teaching the prisoners of war how to pick cotton, and cotton-picking technique generally. Children also picked cotton during World War II: “some of the children could pick as much cotton as anybody if they would do it, but of course they, they didn’t do it.”

Describes changes in cotton gin ownership and equipment. When he was growing up it “would take thirty minutes to gin a bale of cotton.” Nowadays some gins can gin ten bales an hour.

Whether farming with mules or machinery, “either one of ’em’s hard work, ’course then we just took it slow and easy with the mules, and machinery you got to be on your toes and you just give out or get tired

just as quick in doing one job as we did the other . . . ” Tharp goes on to discuss additional details about mule behavior and farming with mules.

TAPE THREE, SIDE A:

His sisters, although they worked outside hoeing and thinning, for example, did not work with the mules. Additional information provided concerning farming methods practiced in the early part of the twentieth century.

TAPE THREE, SIDE B: Blank

TAPE FOUR, SIDE A:

Discusses the purchase of his farm in 1937 from the Brazito Land and Development Company. The farm was 150 acres and was located six miles from Las Cruces. The Brazito Land and Development company was an “association” that owned property from Mesquite to north of Las Cruces. They were not making a profit on their farms and that is why they were for sale. (Tharp added additional acreage and the farm is now comprised of 600 acres).

He paid \$150 per acre for the farmland. Today the same land would sell for \$5000 to \$6000 an acre, and if it were planted in pecans it would cost \$10,000 to \$14,000 per acre. In the effort to diversify, Tharp has sixty acres of pecans, but his main crop is cotton.

He added onto his farm by purchasing the small farms of principally “Spanish” (Hispanic) landowners. He tore down the buildings on these properties to gain additional farm land.

Describes the process land leveling in the late 1940s when tractors became available; however, a lot of leveling was done with teams of horses and mules pulling “scrapers or buck scrapers.” They paid their laborers a \$1.00 to \$1.50 per day. “Now a tractor would level as much in a day as they did in a month, probably.”

His farm has always been managed by family members, brothers or brothers-in-law.

Eventually the Tharps bought additional farmland at Deming. They use well water to irrigate there. At their farm near Las Cruces they use flood irrigation that costs \$40 an acre, at the Deming farm the cost of pumping well water is \$100 to \$140 per acre.

Laser leveling became feasible in the 1960s and 1970s. Most people do not own these “rigs,” but hire contractors to provide the service.

The Tharps have used the same contractor, Johnson Company, since 1940 to harvest their vegetable crop. The contractor is not only responsible for harvesting the lettuce, for example, but also advises the farmer on the market for the product. The Johnson Company works in Arizona and California, as well as New Mexico.

Discusses crop diversification, and crops that are “soil-building,” such as alfalfa. In the Mesilla Valley

there is a problem with “salty” land from irrigation. Sometimes this problem can be addressed by leaching out the salt with “heavy irrigation.”

Tharp married Avalene Coleman from Paris, Texas in 1936. He describes where they lived and their social activities. The couple had three children.

TAPE FOUR, SIDE B:

Discusses the National Cotton Council and the service they provide to the cotton brokers. New Mexico is in the Western division, along with California and Arizona. These associations advise and lobby elected officials on the needs of industry. These associations were important when growers were trying to get mills to accept long staple cotton.

Describes his community involvement of serving on the Board of Regents for New Mexico State University and on the Board of Directors of Memorial Hospital in Las Cruces. He saw the growth of medical care in Las Cruces from the McBride Hospital, essentially just a room where people stayed if they were very ill, to an eight to ten room adobe-constructed hospital on Alameda Avenue, to the present hospital on Telshor Avenue. Tharp was also very active in the First Baptist Church as a deacon and member of the trustee board.

The interview ends as Tharp discusses changes he has witnessed in Mesilla Valley agriculture since 1929.