

**NEW MEXICO
FARM & RANCH
HERITAGE
MUSEUM**

**ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
INTERVIEW ABSTRACT**

CONSULTANT: Bessie Stiles Gibson

DATE OF BIRTH: May 24, 1909 GENDER: Female

DATES OF INTERVIEW: October 31, 1997 and January 13, 1998

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: October 31, 1997: Interviewer's residence in Las Cruces
January 13, 1998: Gibson's residence in Albuquerque

INTERVIEWER: Jane O'Cain

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM OTHER _____

TRANSCRIBED: Yes: August 19, 1998

NUMBER OF TAPES: Five

ABTRACTOR: Jane Allen

DATE ABSTRACTED: October 2001

QUALITY OF RECORDING (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Mrs. Bessie Gibson relates her family background and that of her husband, Jim Gibson. She tells of her childhood in Texas and New Mexico. Most of the interview focuses on her life in the Farmington, New Mexico, area before and after her marriage.

DATE RANGE: 1872 – 1998

ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

TAPE ONE, SIDE A:

New Mexico Farm & Ranch Heritage Museum interviewer Jane O'Cain interviews Mrs. Bessie Stiles Gibson on October 31, 1997, at the Las Cruces, NM, residence of her daughter Mrs. Simmie Plummer, and January 13, 1998, at Mrs. Gibson's residence in Albuquerque, NM. Also present at the October 31 interview was Simmie Plummer.

Mrs. Gibson was born on May 24, 1909, in Post, Texas. Her father, David William Stiles, was born on July 27, 1872, and came to New Mexico from Snyder, Texas, when he was twenty-one to work as a cowboy on ranches in the southeastern part of the state. He worked for a time as a horse dealer, and on a trip that took him to Spur, Texas, met Andrew McClain, father of Flora, whom he married when she was twenty-three and he was thirty-three. About a year later, when Garza County, Texas, was formed, he and Flora moved to the county seat, Post, and he became the first county assessor of Garza County. Post, Texas, was a planned community founded by C. W. Post, "the cereal man."

Mrs. Gibson and her sister, two years younger, were both born while the family lived in Post. In 1912 when New Mexico became a state, the family moved to Tatum and acquired a small ranch. Mr. Stiles built an adobe house, drilled a well, and had an adobe tank built. The family lived there for three years, during which a son, Lindley, was born.

Subsequently, they moved to the caprock, where they stayed for about three years. While living on the caprock, Mrs. Stiles taught Bessie at home for a year until a one-room school was built and a Mr. Greenwade from Roswell, who lived with the Stiles family, was hired as teacher.

Mrs. Gibson tells how when her mother had to go to Roswell to give birth to her fourth child, who was born prematurely, Mr. Greenwade cared for the ranch and two of the three children, Bessie and Dyvena, taking Dyvena, who wasn't yet of school age, with them to school each morning. When the mother came home with the premature infant, she made a bed in a chair in front of the open oven door to keep the baby warm until he was old enough to be moved to the bedroom.

Mrs. Gibson recalls that at age seven she fed chickens and gathered eggs and watched the younger children for her mother. She notes that of the children born by this time, only one had not been born at home with assistance from female family members.

Mrs. Gibson relates that Mr. Stiles built a house of lumber on the caprock and drilled for water. He bought a few registered Herefords, along with other cattle. However, in the fall of 1917 when the area was opened for homesteading and it became evident that there was little space for running cattle, he sold the ranch at the caprock and bought a section of railroad land thirteen miles north of Grants. There he built a house and made other improvements.

Asked about her father's brand at the time, Mrs. Gibson indicates that it was 161 and then MX. Each family member had a brand. Asked about income sources, she affirms that they grew vegetables and had fruit trees for family consumption, but that they derived little income from sources other than their cattle.

Mrs. Gibson did not remember having roundups with other area ranchers. However, she does note that the ranchers visited one another and though there was no church in Tatum at the time, someone came by about once a month to hold a service in the schoolhouse and there were camp meetings each summer. She describes some of the social activities involved with camp meetings, including church services, games, and cooking and eating together.

In describing the move from the caprock to Grants, Mrs. Gibson notes that her father, who had the first registered Hereford cattle herd in New Mexico, had bought a registered Hereford bull and a few cows and that he bought more cows when he got to Grants. The transportation to Grants was a black Ford with a “step that went from one fender to the front fender,” a toolbox on one side, and no door to the driver’s side. The household goods were transported in the Ford; the cattle were shipped by rail—possibly driven to Roswell and then shipped to Grants and then driven from Grants to the ranch.

TAPE ONE, SIDE B:

With the help of family members, already living in the Grants area, two wells were drilled and a house and barns and corral were built. Mrs. Gibson talks about the difficulty involved in arranging for the children’s schooling. School was taught by a seventeen-year-old cousin in a room in the family home because of the inadequacy of the half-day schooling provided in Grants. The mother’s resourcefulness provided school textbooks and literature for Sunday school lessons.

The father soon purchased a place on the outskirts of Farmington, where the mother and children resided so the children could go to school in Farmington. Mrs. Gibson tells about the move to Farmington in wagons drawn by horses, a trip that required six days. The new home was on ten acres that provided for gardening and raising some hay. Population of Farmington at the time was about fifteen hundred, with a bank, post office, school (including a high school), movie theater, and other business buildings.

Mrs. Gibson’s mother was a social person who took the children to the Baptist church on Sundays and to Wednesday prayer meetings, and to a chatauqua performance in July or August of 1920, their first year there. The main churches were Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, and Catholic. Asked about Mormon history, Mrs. Gibson briefly tells what she knows of Mormon history in the area.

Mrs. Gibson tells of starting school in Farmington in the fall of 1920 and of how well prepared she and her siblings were as a result of her mother’s supervision of their schooling and arrangement for appropriate study materials while they were in Grants.

Mrs. Gibson tells how her father was determined that Lindley, her brother, would be a cowboy and how Lindley was taken out of school at times to help the father, causing resentment among the girls in the family because they didn’t get to miss school for work. Lindley, she says, later wrote a book titled *A Cowboy in the Classroom*.

An unusually cold winter in 1925 and 1926 brought the residence in Farmington to an end. The father sold the cattle that survived for a piece of land. He also bought a hotel near the Bluewater Dam, which was being constructed. The family ran the hotel, the mother cooking, and the girls cleaning the rooms. Then when school started the father took Dyvena, Bessie, and Lindley back to Farmington and rented a house for the three to live in while they continued with school.

TAPE TWO, SIDE A:

Additional information concerning her parents' history was sought. Asked about the ranches her father had worked on as a young man, Mrs. Gibson named the Jinglebob Ranch, but her memory is sketchy about others. She thinks he may have worked for Oliver Goodnight and Charles Loving and that he was on some of the long cattle drives from New Mexico toward the railheads in Kansas.

Mrs. Gibson talks about her mother's background, about her mother's belonging to literary societies and memorizing and giving readings and says that she often soothed her children by "giving one of her readings." Mrs. Gibson's mother's family came from Tennessee to Texas, and she thinks the mother was born October 6, 1882, in Hunt County or Hill County in eastern Texas. The family moved to West Texas when the Spur pasture was opened to homesteading. Other members of the mother's family moved to Oregon and into New Mexico.

Mrs. Gibson's mother had a tenth grade education. With coaching from her father's younger brother, she passed the teacher's exam in Texas and taught in Texas rural schools for two or three years. Her parents married in 1905 and moved to Post, Texas, within the year following their marriage.

The discussion returns to Farmington and irrigation. Mrs. Gibson says that their first home in Farmington was irrigated with water from the Animas River, a tributary of the San Juan River. There is some brief discussion of drought and water rationing in the area.

In Farmington, Mrs. Gibson says, her mother packed apples every fall for two or three years for Phil Shanks. She describes how the apples were brought in by the pickers and graded as they were packed, then shipped out by rail to Durango, Colorado.

The discussion turns to 1925 and the birth of Mrs. Gibson's sister Cassie. Mrs. Gibson tells how she cared for the younger children in the family. She mentions the cold winter of 1925-26 and drought and the Navajo Irrigation Project. She tells about her father's drilling a well at Grants that turned out to be a dry hole and about how the father used water witching to locate water. She discusses the availability of water in Farmington and says that her father grew wheat and some alfalfa on his farm at La Plata.

Mrs. Gibson graduated from high school in 1927, and with money from selling the hotel in Bluewater, her father sent her to Montezuma Baptist College, where she lived in Montezuma Castle and had her first experience with indoor plumbing. She explains that Montezuma Castle, which had once been called the "Monte Carlo of the West," had burned down and been rebuilt. She produces a newspaper clipping from October 14, 1997, that indicates that the resort was donated to the YMCA in 1913 and then given to the Southern Baptist Convention in 1920. The castle was then sold to the Catholic Church in 1937.

Mrs. Gibson relates that she attended school there for a year and that at the time it consisted of a high school and a four-year college. However, the hotel in Bluewater burned down and there was no longer any money for college. Noting her father's generosity, she defers to Simmie Plummer, her daughter, who tells about her grandparents' generosity in helping others. After her year in college, Mrs. Gibson returned to Farmington.

TAPE TWO, SIDE B:

Asked about problems associated with keeping the five children clothed and having clothing for college, Mrs. Gibson says that her mother usually made their clothes. She says that although they were not wealthy, they always had new clothes for Easter, most of which her mother made. After taking home economics in high school, Mrs. Gibson made all of her own clothes and some clothing for her siblings and for her own children as they grew up.

Asked about the nature and preparation of family meals, Mrs. Gibson says that her father thought light bread “was made for women and children,” so the mother made biscuits at least once if not twice a day. She tells of having to use corn meal during World War I because food rationing dictated that “if you bought a sack of flour, you had to buy a sack of cornmeal.” In addition the mother canned for the family. She says they ate lots of pinto beans.

Mrs. Gibson taught at Flora Vista for a year and a half. During this time she began dating her husband, whom she had known from high school. Meantime her father was building a campground, “the very early type of motel,” one of the first to be built, consisting of cabins and a central bath and wash area. Farmington at the time was experiencing economic growth from oil and mining.

TAPE THREE, SIDE A:

The interview continues on January 13, 1998. It begins with a question about how Mrs. Gibson fixed her hair when she was a young girl. She tells how she wound her hair around her mother’s worn stockings to form ringlets. She also tells of using a curling iron heated in a kerosene lantern. Her mother also used the curling iron. The mother used homemade rats (from her own hair that had fallen out) to form her pompadour.

Mrs. Gibson tells how, as a young girl, her main job was to care for the younger children. She tells of a boiled custard that her mother made for Christmas dinners, chilling it in a bucket set out in the snow. Mrs. Gibson also made the pudding and was responsible for putting the recipe in a cookbook published by the Ladies Aide. Another recipe, for fruitcake, obtained from her mother, she put in the cookbook. And her daughter Simmie still makes the fruitcake to give as gifts to aunts and uncles at Christmas time. Mrs. Gibson relates the custard recipe.

She says she did not know her grandparents well, can’t remember being “cuddled” by them, but that they visited them once a year. Neither, she says, did she see her own grandsons more than about once a year.

Asked if her parents told many stories to her when she was a child, she says she doesn’t remember much. Asked about remedies or cures her mother used, Mrs. Gibson says her mother used turpentine, Castoria, and occasionally castor oil. Her father used kerosene and turpentine on animals, presumably as an antibiotic.

Mrs. Gibson says that she and her siblings were never taken to a doctor. They weren’t that sick; their only problems were whooping cough and chicken pox, things like that. Her mother, however, saw a doctor in Roswell (sixty miles from home) when she had a difficult pregnancy before Woodrow was born. Doctors, she says, covered a lot of territory, sometimes visiting people in their homes. She indicates that her immediate family did not come down with the flu during the 1918 epidemic, but relates how her mother visited a friend who had the flu.

The discussion turns to the campground cabins her father built. She describes the interior of the cabins and tells how her father's interest turned to the campgrounds after the cold winter of 1925-26 when more than two hundred head of his cattle froze to death. The campground, called the Cowboy Campground, attracted people who moved to Farmington for jobs.

TAPE THREE, SIDE B:

Mrs. Gibson says that the family kept the campground throughout the Depression and the mother managed it for a while after the father died of a heart attack in 1946.

Mrs. Gibson tells about her years teaching at Flora Vista, a two-room school. High school students were bussed to Aztec. She taught the lower four grades, about twenty students. Her pay, with a second grade certificate, was eighty dollars a month. She roomed with a family and paid twenty-five dollars a month for board five days a week, returning to Farmington on the weekends. Her second year she had a first grade certificate and pay was eighty-five dollars a month. She talks about the difficulty of teaching four different grade levels in one room. She comments about the few options for women at the time. Some women in the community, including her mother, packed apples to earn money. Her mother used her earnings for clothing for the children. She notes that no one went hungry, but no one in the community had money to "splurge."

Asked about Navajo children in the community, Mrs. Gibson speaks of one family who attended school in Farmington because they were fluent in English. Most Navajo children attended boarding school in places like Shiprock and Crownpoint.

The conversation turns to Mrs Gibson and her husband Jim and their dating that began while she was teaching at Flora Vista. Dating included movies on Friday and Saturday nights and picnics on Sunday. Asked if dating was closely supervised in the community, Mrs. Gibson says that young people's groups from the churches frequently had parties and that adults always attended. Adults were usually present at picnics but not at movies. Her parents, she says, did not believe in dancing and wouldn't permit her and her siblings to dance, though when Lindley and Dyvena lived in Farmington by themselves they "learned a lot" and were both good dancers.

In October of 1929, during her second year of teaching at Flora Vista, Mrs. Gibson became engaged to Jim and resigned her teaching position effective in December of that year. The two were married December 21, 1929. Reminded that 1929 was the year of the stock market crash, Mrs. Gibson says they were not aware of the market crash when they married, and she notes that not many people in Farmington were involved in the market. Mrs. Gibson's sister Dyvena married her husband, Burl Crawford, at the same time. The two couples "eloped" to Durango, Colorado, and were married in a church parsonage. Mrs. Gibson comments that such ceremonies were common because few people had money to spend on elaborate ceremonies.

Asked how her husband's family came to be in New Mexico, Mrs. Gibson tells that he came from a mercantile family who had run a store in St. Louis, Missouri, for more than a hundred years. The family thought Jim Gibson's father had tuberculosis and sent him to Colorado, where he his future wife as a fifteen-year-old girl waiting tables in an establishment run by her mother in Beulah, a summer resort west of Pueblo. Jim's father got into the mercantile business in Colorado and from there moved to Dayton, New Mexico, between Artesia and Carlsbad, where he established a grocery store. When water became scarce, they went on to Flora Vista and ran a store there for two or three years and then moved on to a store in Farmington.

TAPE FOUR, SIDE A:

The family sold mostly groceries, some yardage, and “Vaseline and Mentholatum and things like that.” Dad Gibson bought the trading post at Mexican Water in Arizona the year Jim was supposed to graduate. Jim was taken out to run the store in Mexican Water in January 1924, where he learned to communicate with the local Navajos, and he remained there until his father sold the store in Farmington and moved to Mexican Water. Then Jim went to work for the “oil companies.” Within a short time Jim returned to Farmington and went to work for Willis Martin, who owned a store on the Chaco; he eventually bought the store from Martin. Mrs. Gibson describes the nature of the trading that took place with the Navajos, which consisted of bartering wool for food and supplies.

At the time of their marriage, Jim was managing the White Rock Trading Company on the south side of the Chaco. Mrs. Gibson describes severe weather and austere living conditions on the land her husband homesteaded on the Chaco, where they built their home and ran the trading company he bought from Willis Martin. She tells of making and flying a kite and of learning to shoot a gun in the company of her husband and his friend Hal, who helped him in the store. She tells of keeping a battery radio operating, playing cards and cribbage and other games, and of the eighty-mile, four-hour trip into Farmington that involved crossing Chaco Wash. She discusses the business arrangements they had with their wholesalers in Farmington, how they traded Indian wool for supplies to trade back to the Indians.

Mrs. Gibson describes how the Navajos lived during austere times, raising corn on a lake bottom and preserving it in pits. She tells of buying corn, beef, and mutton from the Indians and of canning beef. She tells how the United State Indian Service enforced the Navajo Stock Reduction Act and remarks on the unrealistic expectations of the government workers. She also tells how the traders encouraged the Navajo women in the making of rugs and how the traders served as middlemen in the rug trade.

TAPE FOUR, SIDE B:

Mrs. Gibson talks briefly about the wholesalers in the area. Farmington Mercantile was the only one in Farmington, with a branch called Durango Mercantile in Durango, Colorado. There were two wholesalers in the Kirtland area and one in Fruitland. She discusses the Navajos’ weaving of rugs, the sources of dyes, the difficulty in identifying the weavers, and some of the economic aspects of the rug trade. Few of the labels, she notes, carried the name of the weaver in the early twentieth century.

Mrs. Gibson talks about the difficulty of communicating with the Navajo people, who sometimes refused to speak English even when they could. She learned the names of most of the products they sold. She tells one story of having a conversation in English with a Navajo man, Henry Succo, who had never spoken in English to her husband. Henry, she says, had learned English when he went to school in Fort Lewis, then an Indian school.

Mrs. Gibson tells of the difficulty of crossing the Chaco Wash after a rain and of one instance when she and her brother Lindley spent the night in the car because they couldn’t cross it.

Mrs. Gibson also tells of the hospitals built on the reservations in the nineteen thirties for the Indians. The Indians were afraid of the hospitals and the government encouraged the traders to use them in hopes of convincing the Indians to use them. She relates a story about her own use of

one of the hospitals during a pregnancy when she sustained a ruptured appendix and of the months she spent in bed under the care of Jim's sister who lived at Table Mesa and in the care of her mother in Farmington. The pregnancy resulted in a miscarriage. In addition, a child born two years later (1934) died in infancy. Her next child, Esther Ruth, was born in 1936.

By this time Jim was having health problems, so they sold the trading post in the fall of 1936. Mrs. Gibson tells of some of the improvements they had made to their house about 1934 "when things began to get better."

TAPE FIVE, SIDE A:

In 1936, homeless and with a small baby, the Gibsons packed up their belongings and bought a car and traveled, to see the country and looking for a "location," to California, back through Texas, to St. Louis. They also went to Rochester, Minnesota, where Jim went through the Mayo Clinic and they found nothing wrong with him. Then they went back to Farmington, and Jim bought half interest in the Ford dealership in Farmington in 1938.

They lived in a friend's house and then rented until they could build a new house for themselves. Business was good and they were able to pay for the house in four years. When World War II started Jim's work was classified as essential because he was responsible for keeping cars going. However, the stress of running the business during the war left him in ill health. Mrs. Gibson speaks of the stress of Jim's wartime responsibilities that included such matters as tire allocation, and notes that a limit of fifty miles was placed on travel during the war.

Mr. Gibson had hernia surgery in 1944. His mother was also in ill health, dying in 1944. Mrs. Gibson's sister Simmie died of a ruptured appendix in January of 1939. The Gibson's daughter Simmie was born in December of 1939. During the winter of 1946, Jim's father was taking baths in Truth or Consequences (then Hot Springs) and died from burns he received when a hot water heater exploded in the motel room where he was taking a bath. Within days Mrs. Gibson's father also died.

With money inherited when Jim's father died, the family took a trip into the Northwest and to various places in New Mexico in 1947. Then in November Jim became ill and had a kidney removed. He had also had a problem with bleeding ulcers and had to have part of his stomach removed. Consequently, he went into real estate and stayed in that until he retired.

Real estate boomed in Farmington for a time after the war and Jim did well. However, many people defaulted on their loans. Mrs. Gibson tells of the complexity of keeping books and handling paperwork for the government on the houses involved.

Mrs. Gibson talks about the advantages of day schools over boarding schools for Indian children, in that because the children took what they learned home, the parents learned too.

Mrs. Gibson says that she lived alone for nearly eight years after Jim died in 1988. She remarks that he and Burl Crawford, Dyvena's husband, died exactly one month apart.

TAPE FIVE, SIDE B:

Mrs. Gibson tells how the Gibsons and Crawfords were preparing to celebrate their fiftieth wedding anniversaries in 1979, but Burl was paralyzed in an auto accident just before the

celebration and had to attend in a wheelchair. Burl suffered from paralysis the remainder of his life. Dyvena still lives in Farmington.