



ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
INTERVIEW ABSTRACT

CONSULTANT: Alvin Davidson

DATE OF BIRTH: October 31, 1929 GENDER: Male

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: March 11, 1999

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: New Mexico Farm & Ranch Heritage Museum

INTERVIEWER: Rhonda Jackson

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM___X___ OTHER:

TRANSCRIBED: Yes: July 20, 2000

NUMBER OF TAPES: One

ABTRACTOR: Jane Martens

DATE ABSTRACTED: June 22, 2000

QUALITY OF RECORDING (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Technological innovations in agriculture and changes in agricultural production in eastern Kansas and the Mesilla Valley of New Mexico; farmers' organizations and cooperatives; farm life in the Midwest during the Depression through World War II including cooperative labor among local farmers.

DATE RANGE: 1930s -1999

ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

TAPE ONE, SIDE A:

Alvin Davidson was born into a farm family in northeastern Kansas near Willison. His family rented a farm where they followed a diversified economic strategy. They grew wheat as a cash crop, oats, corn, sorghums, alfalfa and clover. They raised cattle, hogs, sheep, and horses. This protected against failure of a single crop but was expensive in that it required quite a bit of farm machinery including a threshing machine, binder, etc. Prices for produce were low during the Depression but his family never had to kill any livestock. Fortunately, his father's farm was far to the east in Kansas and partially wooded so it was not much affected by the storms of the Dust Bowl proper.

The consultant discusses Roosevelt's farm program, "Ever-normal Granaries," and how government restrictions on farming created resistance among some farmers. He questions the overall benefits of an enlarged Department of Agriculture.

The farm equipment Davidson used by the later 1930s was mostly motorized rather than horse-drawn. His father had had several tractors by that time. They got their first rubber-tired tractor around 1940 and their first row-crop tractor in 1941. Prior to that time, row crops were cultivated entirely with horses. Combine machines were not much used in northeast Kansas until the mid-1930s when small combines began to be produced. Even so, farmers still threshed some grain to get the straw for livestock bedding. Pick-up balers, available in the late '30s, were then used to pick up bales of straw.

Farmers there, including Davidson's grandfathers, carried out a "joint venture" [formed an informal business combine] whereby they shared the cost and use of expensive machinery, like a tractor and threshing machine. The beginning of World War II (the summer of 1942) put an end to threshing parties because young men were leaving the farms to join the military. The labor shortage was not eased even after the war because many returning soldiers did not continue to farm.

Davidson reminisces about the threshing parties of his childhood. Farmers cooperated with each other at harvest time because to bring in hay efficiently, three or four men were needed and most families did not have that many men available. (Davidson's father never used hired hands but some of his brothers worked as farm laborers [from tape one, side two].) The farmer whose grain was being threshed would buy all the food to feed his neighbors while they worked with him on his farm. Four or five of the women would help with the cooking. There were so many to feed, people sometimes had to eat in two shifts. When one farm was finished, the thresher would be moved to the next. It was an exciting time for the young Davidson.

Davidson learned to be a machinist while in the Navy. He moved to New Mexico in 1960 because of the warm climate and started working for a man who had a machine shop on his farm. The consultant says he and his employer, a Danish immigrant named Ottason, were the "reverse"—Ottason was a machinist who became a farmer while Davidson was a farmer who became a machinist. However, Davidson retains his interest in farming.

Farming methods in New Mexico are very different from those in east Kansas, Davidson says, because of irrigation in the Southwest. Irrigation allows crops to be planted more densely. With

a reliable water supply and mild weather, crop yields, as with alfalfa, can be twice as great. However, costs of production (water, ditch maintenance, labor involved in actual irrigation) are greater and there are special problems such as soil compaction.

Consultant discusses the changes he has seen in Mesilla Valley farming. Many more acres of land have been converted from cotton fields to pecan orchards (by such farmers as the Stahmans, Fletchers, and Salopeks). The number of dairies has increased greatly since the mid-1960s, a number of which are located along Interstate Hwy. 10.

Community suppers at the old schoolhouses near Brazito, New Mexico (similar to the ones he attended in Kansas) permitted Davidson to become acquainted with local farmers. In the early '60s, they told him about shipping hay out of the area by rail. When new dairies were introduced, the dairies bought much of the hay. Now the dairies use ensilage—again producing a surplus of hay. Davidson also notes the emergence of corn production in the last decade or so to provide ensilage for the dairies.

TAPE ONE, SIDE B:

In the machine shop, which he bought when his employer retired, Davidson did not generally repair farm machinery but, rather, did precision work for the space industry such as the making of rocket components. However, he sometimes replaced a shaft or bearings on pecan-processing equipment during the harvest.

Now retired, the consultant began restoring tractors as a hobby in 1993. He became interested in this activity after attending tractor shows throughout the country. He founded the Vintage Car Club in 1994 and is the club historian. The club displays equipment such as antique garden tractors and small gas engines at fairs and other gatherings.

Davidson has a collection of four restored tractors and is co-owner of one of the oldest tractors (built in 1929) in the Mesilla Valley. He has researched the history of some of the tractors. One John Deere tractor was traced by sending the serial number in to the company.

Davidson has given some thought to the “politics” of agriculture. He believes farmers became more politicized when the government began to intervene more in farming affairs especially in the last forty years. He talks about the attempts by the Farmers’ Union and the Grange to “unionize” farmers and why they were unsuccessful. He describes the limited functions of farm cooperatives including the one begun in his area of New Mexico in 1956.

Consultant’s father raised some dairy cattle, many crossbred. The milk was run through a cream separator on the farm and the cream was picked up by a creamery truck. Whole milk was sold to a dairy, which made cheese, butter, and powdered milk (much used during World War II).

Equipment used to process milk for home use gradually was improved. Butter churns from the plunger-type to the Dazey churn were used on Davidson’s father’s farm. Cream separators from the “water separator” to the electrical kind were used to produce cream for people and skim milk for livestock. No pasteurization or homogenization was done but no one in the family ever got sick from drinking whole milk “right from the cow.”

Meat processing was a cooperative activity like haying. Three or four neighbors would help Davidson’s father butcher a hog or cow. Meat was either salted or canned due to lack of refrigeration. Davidson hated to eat the salted meat because neither washing nor boiling could

remove the extremely salty taste. His family did not refrigerate meat until 1944 when they rented a meat locker from the locker plant in town.

The county where Davidson grew up in Kansas has changed from an area of large farms, many with big herds of cattle, to one with ten to fifteen dairies. Small farmers were not able to survive there or elsewhere in Kansas, Davidson asserts. "The land is still being farmed but it's being farmed by very few people."

Davidson's family raised a dozen or so sheep for the wool only; they did not butcher sheep. Consultant raised a sheep as a 4-H project one year. Children living in town without the space to raise animals did other things such as sewing and gardening. These projects were entered in the county fair.

Fairs interested Davidson particularly because of their machinery and agricultural exhibits. In addition to going to the county fairs, he also attended the Kansas Free Fair (no longer in existence) in Topeka. It was much larger than the present-day New Mexico State Fair in Albuquerque because Kansas is such an important agricultural state. He says the county fairs in the two states are about the same size.