



ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
INTERVIEW ABSTRACT

CONSULTANT: Martin Yriart

DATE OF BIRTH: April 8, 1930 GENDER: Male

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: October 6, 2007

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Yriart home in Roswell, N.M.

INTERVIEWER: Marcie Palmer

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMFRHM_ X OTHER _____

TRANSCRIBED: No

NUMBER OF TAPES: Two

ABTRACTOR: Donna M. Wojcik

DATE ABSTRACTED: December 20, 2007

RECORDING QUALITY (SPECIFY): Fair – difficult to understand

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Sheep farming in Southeast New Mexico

DATE RANGE: 1930-2007

ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

TAPE ONE, SIDE A:

The interview begins with Yriart background information. Yriart's full name is Robert Martin Yriart. While he was in the Army he went by his first name. He was born in Roswell and grew up on a ranch; he spent his first eleven years there. He began school in 1935, when he was five years old and attended until 1941. At that time, schools were being cut back because there were not enough children attending. Yriart and his mother moved to Roswell so that Yriart could finish school.

Yriart ancestors were early settlers in West Texas and worked on ranches from the late 1870s to the early 1900s. His mother was born Lucille Rose. His maternal great-grandfather was a professional buffalo hunter. Yriart has the buffalo rifle he used to hunt with. In 1900 all the relatives, both Rose's and Yriart's, moved to the Roswell area and purchased land along the Spring River. His mother was born in 1903, and she attended school there.

Yriart's father, Graciano, grew up in France. Graciano's Uncle Filsa came to New Mexico and purchased a ranch south of Hope. Graciano's paternal cousins, Pete and Martin Louisiana, followed and in 1909 Graciano joined them. Young men in France were expected to go into the French Army at age eighteen, so Graciano came to the United State when he was seventeen. He did not know anyone when he arrived in New York, nor did he speak English. He traveled by train to Roswell. He learned to say "soup" while on the train, and Yriart believes that this was probably the only thing his father ate along the way to Roswell. He worked for Uncle Filsa until 1913. During those years he was paid in sheep. Graciano and the cousins branched out on their own and purchased a ranch together in 1917. They ran approximately 20,000 sheep. In 1928 the cousins left, and Graciano partnered in a ranch purchase with a man named Worswick. After Worswick's death in 1940, the ranch was split. Worswick's widow took the north portion of the ranch and Yriart got the south end, which consisted of approximately 30 sections.

Yriart's parents met at a school east of the Yriart ranch. Graciano Yriart married Lucille Rose in 1928. There was no indoor bathroom in the house at headquarters when Yriart was a child; however, in 1942 a bathroom was added onto the house. Prior to that time the house had four bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen, and a back porch. In 1936 Graciano bought a six-volt Windcharger to run electric lights. In 1940 he purchased a larger unit that produced 32 volts from the twenty-four batteries. This was primarily used to run the electric lights and an iron. The Rural Electric Association put lines up to the ranch in 1952. In the early days on the ranch, communication wire ran on top of the barbed wire fencing, thus linking three ranches together, each with a different ring. Radio was the main means of communication until 1988, when the permanent telephone service was put in.

Yriart recalls the first radio in the house and states that it was not used much because it ran on battery. The family got their first television in 1954. Yriart recalls the large aerial antenna that was needed to get a good picture. Yriart married his wife in 1951. In 1953, he got land south of his father's ranch. Since there was no house on it, they lived with his father until they could build a house.

When Yriart was a child, his mother, sister and he, were living in Roswell to be closer to school, they would go up to the ranch from Friday to Sunday. He recalls that the ranch cook made the best biscuits he had ever tasted.

Herders were used until 1936, although fences were being put up after 1925. Fencing land with barbed-wire fences was against the law because the land was supposed to be open range, but many ranchers did it anyway. The final fencing was done in 1938, when Yriart was eight years old. There was a lot of BLM [*Bureau of Land Management*] land on the north side of the ranch, and on the south side it was mostly deeded or homesteaded land. Yriart's parents took care of his land while he was in the Army.

TAPE ONE, SIDE B:

Yriart's father did not have a truck in the early days of the ranch. He would purchase a car and remove the back seat. In this space, he would load a water barrel, food and other supplies for the sheep camps. The camps were checked every two to three days. The cars would only hold up for about a year because there were no real roads to travel on out to the camps. He always purchased new vehicles.

There was a shearing plant [barn] west of headquarters where all the shearing was done. Sheep from a neighboring ranch were also sheared there. Someone burned this shearing plant down in 1924, and another one was built five miles from there.

The new shearing plant had twenty-four shearing stations. Without electricity, a one-cylinder engine ran the shearers. One man was hired just to run the machine. Shearing took place for thirty days. The barn was used for about six years. On an average 100,000 sheep were sheared there. The wool was placed in sacks for transport to Roswell. Each sack was four to five feet long. As many as thirty wagons would be waiting to be loaded with wool sacks. Each wagon could hold seven or eight sacks. The wool from individual ranches was kept separated for tracking purposes. Shearing crews changed from year to year depending on who was available at the time.

Shearing apparatus' from the past and the present is discussed. Lambs slated for sale in Roswell were trailed down, a trip of five days. Shearers were hired from Texas. The Yriart Ranch foreman had a crew of shearers, portable sleeping quarters, portable cookhouse, and a cook. A good crew of shearers could shear approximately 200 sheep per hour.

Yriart recalls that in 1937 trucks full of sheep could not make it up a hill. Each loaded truck was pulled up the hill by a "Bobtail" International truck. Twenty-four trucks were pulled up in all. Often sheep would get trampled and die. Modern transport trailers have four levels and can haul up to 600 sheep per truck.

When Yriart retired, he had 1400 sheep. When the sheep went to market, he separated male lambs from ewes and kept back about 250 of the ewes to replace older ewes in the herd. Ewes were only kept until they were seven years old. Ewes begin having lambs in their second year.

Yriart attended New Mexico A&M [now New Mexico State University] after attending Arkansas State for one semester. He did not have to fight in the Korean War because he got a deferment to help at the ranch. When he first went into the Army, he went for sixteen weeks of training before being transferred to Ft. Lewis, Washington. He was in the service for two years, after which you were automatically in the Army Reserves for six years. He was discharged from the military in 1963 after serving for eight years.

Yriart had learned to handle guns when he was a child. He was in the High School rifle club and was "a good shot." He was in the Heavy Weapons Division at Ft. Lewis. He belonged to the pistol team and traveled around the United States participating in tournaments. He practiced every day. He returned to the ranch after his discharge from the Army in 1956.

TAPE TWO, SIDE A:

When Yriart returned to the ranch after his discharge, he had approximately 900 sheep on his land. He purchased one-half of the Barnett Ranch in 1964, and increased his sheep herd to 1400. He also had 125 Hereford cattle. In 1970 he bought into a feedlot business owned by a friend. Yearlings were run on different ranches, and Yriart went out to the ranches to check on them. When they were a good size, they were transported to the feedlot. In 1979 the partners decided to go their different ways. Yriart went back to ranching. He preferred Hereford cattle even though most area ranchers ran Angus cattle.

The house in Roswell was purchased in 1957, a year after his daughter was born. He kept this house until 1972, when he purchased the home he lives in now.

Drought was a problem, and Yriart recalls six droughts in the years between 1975 and 1999. When there was not enough water, there was not enough grass. There were two solutions: supplement the feed or sell some off.

Yriart compares prices today to those in the 1980s. Today lambs sell for \$1 per pound. An average lamb is roughly 85 pounds. Wool is selling for \$1.20 per pound. A sheep produces about 10 pounds of wool. In 1980 lambs sold for 45 cents a pound and wool sold for \$1 per pound. Wool is sold by sealed bid. *[Buyers place their bids in secret, so that other buyers don't know who else has bid on the wool, or how much they are bidding.]*

The Roswell Wool Warehouse is the biggest warehouse and handles more wool than anywhere else in the United States. Texas has six smaller warehouses; there is one in Salt Lake City and one in South Dakota. Yriart believes that the sheep industry is a dying industry. Environmental and land issues, regulations and coyotes are putting sheep ranchers out of business.

Since 1999 Yriart has been involved in perfecting his lamb barbeque technique. He has done barbeques for the Wool Grower's Association meetings, AgFest in Santa Fe, and the Livestock Sale Buyer's luncheon at the State Fair. He has cooked for the Wool Sale lunch at Roswell for the past seven years. Lately he only barbeques four or five times a year. He does not share his secret barbeque lamb recipe with anyone. Overall he says he has a busy life and he enjoys it.

He has separate registered brands for his sheep and cattle. His ranch is called Hackberry Draw Ranch, after the hackberry trees that grow in the draws on the ranch. He does not recall any severe losses in his years on the ranch, but does remember that he lost some lambs and ewes with burned udders after one grass fire. The cause of most grass fires is dry lightning strikes.

TAPE TWO, SIDE B:

The discussion of grass fires continues. Some years there were no fires at all. He recalls a fire at night when it was almost impossible to see the road because of the smoke and the lack of moonlight. He says the worst time for fires is before the summer rains.

What does he do for fun? When he was younger, Yriart would water-ski at Ft. Sumner Lake. The lake was previously known as Alamogordo Lake. *[Alamogordo Lake dam opened in 1937. It provided flood control for the Ft. Sumner area.]* He would often take a sheep up to cook and eat, plus a keg of beer. He enjoys fishing but says he only goes out a few times in the summer months. He also enjoys going to the horse races. "Priorities change over time," he says.