

**NEW MEXICO
FARM & RANCH
HERITAGE
MUSEUM**

CONSULTANT: Emma Jean Cervantes

DATE OF BIRTH: circa 1935 SEX: Female

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: July 9, 1996

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: La Mesa, New Mexico

INTERVIEWER: Jane O'Cain

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM OTHER _____

TRANSCRIBED: Yes: September 16, 1997

NUMBER OF TAPES: Three

ABTRACTOR: O'Cain and Macbeth

DATE ABSTRATED: November 30, 2000

QUALITY OF RECORDING (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Cervantes family chile operation in La Mesa, New Mexico area.

DATE RANGE: 1880 – 1996

ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

TAPE ONE, SIDE A:

Emma Jean Cervantes, interviewed on July 9, 1996 by Jane O’Cain in her home two miles south of Las Mesa, New Mexico, was a founding board member for the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Museum. She was born in Mesilla, New Mexico, moved to La Mesa when she was a year old, and educated at Loretto Academy in El Paso as a boarding student from the age of ten. After high school she attended college in Los Angeles and remained in California four years after graduation.

Andres Apodaca (born in Mesilla), paternal grandfather, had 40 acres of land, which passed down equally to four sons. Emma Jean’s father was in high school when he inherited ten acres. He finished high school, decided to become a farmer, bought out his brothers’ acreage, and began truck farming in the 1930s.

Maternal grandfather, Rosalio Morales, who had been a tailor for Pancho Villa, partnered the endeavor by selling produce in silver City, Deming, Alamogordo, and Magdalena on weekends—all cash sales.

In the 1930s Emma Jean’s mother begged for an automatic, wringer washing machine, but the father was adamant about investing in the farm and bought a tractor. In approximately 1940, Andres Apodaca bought 500 undeveloped acres of land in La Mesa for \$90 an acre.

As children, Emma Jean and her sister Mary Helen were in the cotton fields with their mother who weighed sacks of picked cotton. The girls also picked cotton—to keep them busy and amused.

Both parents had drive and ambition and were hard working. The mother was a great cook and learned the farming ways because that is what pleased her husband. She raised cows, made cheese, sold milk and cheese, weighed cotton, and sold produce from the farm in addition to other housewife chores. When Andres Apodaca was thirty-five years old, he began building the family home. It is now 5000 square feet of adobe. He also insisted his daughters become educated: one to be a nurse and one a teacher. Emma Jean became the nurse.

Emma Jean was eight years and Mary Jane six when they first attended Loretto Academy. Only small country schools were available locally, and ambitious, busy parents led to the decision that the girls attend

Loretto Academy. Tuition for two girls was close to \$3000. Loretto expects its students to excel in life; the girls were raised by authoritative and strict parents and nuns.

Emma Jean wanted a Bachelor of Science Degree which was not available in New Mexico or Texas. She attended school in Los Angeles and received her degree in four years. She chose a Chevrolet as her high school graduation gift. Mary Helen chose a hardtop convertible, attended University of Arizona, and has become an administrator in the Las Cruces Public School district.

Emma Jean married a civil engineer and lived in Los Angeles four years after finishing college. Her father flew to Los Angeles to ask if she would like to return to the family agricultural business. She feels that her father asked her to return, in part, because she was mother of his only grandsons. She and her family returned to Las Cruces in 1964 and she assumed an apprenticeship. Her father had increased his holdings to include a ranch in Deming, New Mexico.

As a teenager, she had helped with the accounting; she enjoyed the out-of-door experience, driving the tractor, and riding in the truck with her father. But taking on the job as an adult required energy, time, and dedication. She was not as familiar with the crops of 1964. Pecan farming and high-risk, labor intensive perishable onion and lettuce crops were new to her. Eight wells had been installed for irrigation, more acreage added to make a total of 800 acres—not all of which had been cleared.

Mrs. Cervantes found raising small children, running a farm, being a good wife, mother, and businesswoman difficult. There were challenges working with labor contractors, learning the business, and assuring bankers and accountants that she would continue the business. Her husband was not cooperative in the farm effort and became involved with the chile processing end of business. There were some loyal employees—the foreman was with the family business forty years.

The ranch in Deming was sold, her parents aged and developed ill health; her father was primarily a consultant as the business developed and diversified to crops of lettuce, onions, alfalfa, pecans, and chile.

TAPE ONE, SIDE B:

In 1975-76 production of chile began. Emma Jean's husband decided to leave agricultural endeavors to her and he ran the chile processing plant.

Growing chile presented new challenges and needed different skills. Chile takes more out of the soil than other crops. New Mexico State University has been helpful with providing information and testing seed varieties as well as providing students with practicum projects.

Chile produces well the first two years in a field, then that field must be planted with other crops for four or five years to renew the soil. O’Cain asked about a chile harvesting machine, Emma Jean replied that there is a history, but the machine is not where it needs to be—there are no sensors to detect the color of the pod. Also the harvester clears the field of all growth. Harvesting chile needs the human hand/eye to select quality peppers; the indiscriminate harvester mixes all grades of chile.

Cervantes Farms grow chile in Mexico; they send consultants to teach Mexican growers the use of chemicals, watering methods, and harvesting methods. Production is as far south as Jalisco, with some coming from Flores Magon, Obregòn, Delicias, Chihuahua, and Ascenciòn. Processing Mexican grown chile begins in February. Production is limited to cayenne and jalapeño chiles—the pods must be harvested without stems—a difficult concept for workers who are paid per unit. Chile production began in Mexico in 1987 and comprises about 50% of Cervantes Enterprises production in 1996.

On the La Mesa farm, clearing of acreage continues in the winter when heavy equipment is not needed in the fields. Pecan trees were transplanted and drip irrigation installed for them.

Emma Jean remembers her grandmother and great-grandmother as self sufficient women who made soap, prepared all foods, and preserved everything by dehydration—jerky, tomatoes, and chile. Her paternal grandmother taught the mother, now the daughter teaches her daughter.

Mrs. Cervantes has three children: two sons and one daughter. Joseph Keven, the oldest is an attorney in Albuquerque and is interested in politics; he has two daughters. He earned bachelors and masters degrees in architecture then attended Law School.

A second son [Dino] graduated from New Mexico State University in business and worked for Hormel Chile Company for three years. Professionally and culturally this was an outstanding experience, learning chile processing from Hormel. He returned to the family business and has applied the knowledge to the family business. He was offered stock in the family business to return, and is now considered the agriculturist in the family. He has one daughter.

Daughter graduated from New Mexico State University in marketing, worked for MCI in Albuquerque for three years. She is family oriented, interested in the family business, and expressed a desire to learn the business from her mother; she was offered an option similar to her brother.

In 1996 Emma Jean Cervantes was designated Agriculturist of the Year, the first woman to be selected for the award by New Mexico State University.

In 1987 Mrs. Cervantes had difficulty being received as a serious businesswoman in Mexico. She had to take a male with her, first it was an employee and then her son. She says that even though the Mexicans were loyal and respectful, there was a barrier. When Mexican producers need something they will approach another male, not a female. It has been a cultural learning experience and now the Mexicans deal with both her and her daughter. The first two to three years were most difficult, by the early 1990s, loyalty, respect, and trust had been established.

TAPE TWO, SIDE A:

The times, weather, economy, and NAFTA have influenced chile production in Mexico. Cervantes Enterprises have paid for seed and chemicals and given free consultation in return for production of chile crops. Mexico is able to produce chile more economically than the US. It is a challenge to educate the growers to produce a quality product and sometimes contracts are not renewed.

Cervantes Enterprises also ships to Saudi Arabia and Canada. The company owner in Saudi Arabia sent his son to New Mexico. He lived with Mrs. Cervantes and saw the business from a social as well as business angle. He returned home to explain it all to his father. She leaves all travel to Arabia to her son who also visits the Canadian business associates. He reports that he has not witnessed any women in the business setting in either country.

International Center of Chile was started by Dr. Bosland of New Mexico State University and Dave DeWitt, editor of Chile Pepper Magazine. NMSU chose a founding board of five chile processors and chile growers. The process of establishment mirrors the establishment of the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Museum. Mrs. Cervantes is chairman of the board; their goal is to raise Two and a half million dollars to build a chile museum

Emma Jean Cervantes has been founder of many movements which have been beneficial to the community and rewarding to her. Amongst them are the Cancer Treatment Center, Mesilla Valley Hospice, Memorial Medical Foundation, and she served as chair of the hospital board. She owes her success to good culture, good heritage, good education, good employees, wonderful parents, and family. She thinks her father's success came through the environment and himself—he was a leader and had a willingness to take risks.

Dr. Bill Stephens [Secretary of Agriculture] first approached Mrs. Cervantes in the context of creating the Museum in 1987. The group, all with similar backgrounds, comprised the first board of directors, met at Dr. Thomas' home. They met quarterly, created a mission statement, wrote bylaws, and obtained 501C3 status. There were some conflicts between farmers and ranchers; the group seemed to have a larger representation from the ranchers. Another conflict was deciding the best location for the Museum. They agreed it should be a state wide effort—and discussed several areas—Albuquerque, Ft. Seldon area, Tucumcari, as well as New Mexico State University which ultimately donated the land. Locations both on and off campus were considered.

TAPE TWO, SIDE B:

In 1991 the decision was made to go under the Office of Cultural Affairs to get the needed support for funding and legislation. The process of making a museum was likened to a journey with forks in the road: choices or decisions had to be made. It was also compared to the planting of a seed in the ground with different elements and factors affecting it so that one doesn't know what the end product will be.

Touring the site and seeing the beginning of construction was moving. Mrs. Cervantes expressed that she had been a part of the making of the Farm and Ranch Museum and it is something the whole state of New Mexico has to be proud of.

Fund raising was lengthy and difficult. Fundraisers in different portions of the state were attempted. Difficulties of the times for agriculture were mentioned. Dr. Thomas was anxious to house the collection of historical artifacts and data. Dr. Stephens took the proposal to the legislature, but it failed. And the second time it was presented—the affirmative outcome was not known for several days.

Plans for the building evolved as people named needs for the community and should concentrate on the heritage and culture. Logo, gardens, groomed livestock, exhibition space, restaurant, and gift shop were all discussed.

Bill McIlhane from Albuquerque was chairman and Emma Jean Cervantes was vice-chair of the board when the bid for plans was let. A second call for bids/plans left an element of distrust.

Emma Jean Cervantes feels the mission of the Museum is to tell the history of agriculture from the beginning, to today, and also address the future. It is important to communicate and educate.

TAPE THREE, SIDE A:

Mrs. Cervantes says the future of the Museum depends on obtaining operational money from other financial resources. Look for big donors or endowments to sell the concept that agriculture is the backbone of the nation. It is important for agriculture to be represented correctly—“we’re the voice, and if we shy away from the political arena, or even from journalism, then no one’s going to get the message.”

Past experiences are important—find what worked—decide what didn’t work and move forward. When asked about some form of recognition for Dr. Stephens, Dr. Thomas, Helmuth Naumer and others, Mrs. Cervantes said, “People like recognition and ... will continue to feed on recognition for their dedicated efforts.” Perhaps a bronze plaque to name the dedication and contribution of those first contributors would be good. She thinks the Museum should be named for a big donor or underwriter.

Emma Jean Cervantes is proud to have sat on the board and says she has grown because of her association with the other members of the board.

TAPE THREE, SIDE B: Blank