

**NEW MEXICO
FARM & RANCH
HERITAGE
MUSEUM**

CONSULTANT: John and Jenny Clemmons

DATE OF BIRTH: JC-August 29, 1937 SEX: Male/Female

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: May 2, 1996

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Clemmons Ranch home, rural Kenna, NM

INTERVIEWER: Jane O'Cain

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM ☒ OTHER ☐

TRANSCRIBED: Yes: January 9, 1997

NUMBER OF TAPES: Two

ABTRACTOR: O'Cain and Allen

DATE ABSTRATED: August 8, 2000

QUALITY OF RECORDING (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Mr. Clemmons, who has a doctoral degree in counseling psychology, was an early member of the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum Foundation Board. Mrs. Clemmons has worked as registrar at Eastern New Mexico University and as a consultant training student teachers. The Clemmonses have managed the family ranch—in her family since 1906—since her father's death in 1971.

DATE RANGE: 1906-1996

ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

TAPE ONE, SIDE A:

Interview with John Clemmons, who served as a board member of the Heritage Foundation. Mrs. Clemmons (Jenny) joins the discussion in progress.

John Clemmons was born in 1937 in Texas and moved to New Mexico in 1964 to take a position at the New Mexico Military Institute in Roswell. He met his wife, who was the registrar at Eastern New Mexico University at an educational meeting. After the death of his father-in-law in 1971, he and his wife decided to take over the ranch where they now reside.

The ranch was homesteaded by his wife's grandparents in 1906. He describes that in order to meet the requirement of the homestead law for putting land into cultivation, the family planted a few pumpkin seeds. The pumpkins spread over a large area, and in this way they could preserve the grasslands while meeting the homestead requirements.

At the time of the interview New Mexico was experiencing a severe drought (at the Clemmons Ranch it had been dry for three years). In conjunction with the drought, cattle prices had been very low; however, there had been a recent jump in the cattle futures market, perhaps related to a possibility of selling more beef in Europe, where they are experiencing a scare from "mad cow" disease.

Mr. Clemmons discusses the North American Free Trade Agreement [NAFTA]. He believes that in the long term the free trade agreement will be advantageous to U.S. beef producers, as there is a demand for beef in Mexico that cannot be met domestically. Unfortunately, the Mexican economy suffered a reversal soon after NAFTA was implemented.

The Clemmons Ranch is a stocker steer operation. They get animals weighing 350 pounds out of Mississippi, Missouri, and some parts of Texas. They try to put 400 pounds of weight on the calves and sell them as yearlings. The cattle are then marketed to feed lots through three or four cattle buyers he works with. In 1996, a truckload of 110 to 120 calves cost him \$28,000-\$30,000. Three years prior that many calves would have cost \$60,000. However, he also received \$0.64 per pound for his yearlings in 1995, but three to four years earlier they sold for \$0.88 per pound.

Mr. Clemmons discusses the type of forage available on the home ranch—blue grama and bluestem. Shinnery oak, after it has blossomed, and yucca blossoms provide forage for cattle, especially during drought conditions. There is no surface water on the ranch; all water is from underground wells. He describes the maintenance required on windmills. The Clemmonses have three men working on their ranch at Kenna. They supplementally feed their cattle, even if grass is good. He believes that even with the advent of electric pumps to pump water to the surface, that windmills are the more cost effective. However, some ranches are now using solar-powered pumps to pump water to the surface. He is using solar-powered pumps on his ranches at Yeso and in Lea County, N. M.

TAPE ONE, SIDE B:

The ranch at Yeso has been owned in partnership by the family for several years. They have one ranch they own in Lea County, but they lease another. They always try to lease ranches if they know of one to lease. The tendency of local ranchers is to lease their land rather than sell it. Reasons for leaving the land and leasing it include economic necessity, retirement, the need to have health care available, and death.

Leasing the land permits it to be kept in the family and has the advantage of its providing supplemental retirement income.

Mr. Clemmons notes that the average age of ranching families is increasing and is now about fifty-five. Financing is becoming increasingly difficult, as commercial banks tend to provide fewer agricultural loans, forcing the rancher to obtain loans from federal agencies. He notes, however, that bankers in Clovis, New Mexico, understand the cattle business and like to make cattle loans.

Mr. Clemmons discusses other problems in ranching for younger people, including estate taxes involved when ranches are inherited and the ranch size needed to sustain a family. Where 160 acres, or one section, would have been adequate in 1906, today a family would need at least twenty sections. Not only are ranches increasing in size but they are being integrated with other types of business such as feedlots and packing companies.

Mrs. Clemmons—Jenny—joins the interview and the discussion turns to her family—her grandfather and his homesteading in New Mexico, and her school teacher aunts who joined the grandfather in homesteading. The discussion then turns to Mrs. Clemmons's father, whose industry was responsible for consolidating the homesteaded portions with purchased units into the current ranch unit.

Mrs. Clemmons discusses the original stocking of the ranch with cattle brought on the train from East Texas along with personal possessions. Sheep were also raised on the ranch for a short period of time. The Clemmonses talk of Sunday afternoon excursions to the remains of the original homestead house located about a mile from the present ranch house, where they occasionally find old kitchen utensils, coins, and bottles. This discussion leads to talk of other artifacts left behind by homesteaders in the area as well as evidence of American Indian habitation.

Mrs. Clemmons discusses how her father became involved with the ranch because his father told him he was needed on the ranch while an older brother went to college and became an Army officer.

Mr. Clemmons talks about the practice of trading cattle over the telephone, sight unseen, with people they know and trust and about the importance of "neighboring" and relationships among buyers and sellers and being able to agree on deals without benefit of a written contract. He speaks also about the trustworthiness of ranchers as opposed to business practices of some farmers and feedlot companies.

Mr. Clemmons tells about the death of his father-in-law at age fifty-five in a head-on collision driving from the ranch in Yeso to Elida where he planned to watch an evening basketball game. His death was felt not only by the family but also by the community because of his role as an active cattle buyer. At the time the Clemmonses were living in Roswell and Mr. Clemmons was finishing his doctorate; once he had finished it (1971), they moved to the ranch and with the help of the local people, some of whom they hired to work on the ranch, learned the ranching business. Mrs. Clemmons speaks about her own ignorance of the ranching that stemmed from her father's reluctance to share information with her and her mother because they were women. Mr. Clemmons notes that bookkeeping information sometimes was not written down so they sometimes honored contracts with others based on the word of the other rancher.

In answer to the question whether the ranch was a steer operation in her father's day, Mrs. Clemmons says "yes," and she and Mr. Clemmons explain how her father sometimes kept cows for short periods of time but that the steer operation was his main interest. He was one of the first to run steer yearlings in the area and they were normally a mixture of breeds because a truckload of mixed breeds could be bought much cheaper than a truckload of Black Angus, for example. His success at running a mixture of breeds influenced other ranchers to do the same so that over the last twenty years most ranchers have run yearlings. The high protein content of the grass is conducive to running steers as opposed to cows with

calves. Steer operations tend to be more labor-intensive than cow/calf operations because of veterinary problems involved in raising shipped-in cattle. Mr. Clemmons notes, however, that newly developed vaccines have reduced death loss to about two percent the last two years.

The Clemmonses speak too about the reliability and extended tenure of their employees, some having been with them for twenty years. Mr. Clemmons notes that he trusts his employees to work without close supervision, and that during summer months they may take three days off to go roping somewhere.

TAPE TWO, SIDE A:

The conversation turns to Mrs. Clemmons's role on the ranch. She explains that while her sister sometimes worked outdoors on the ranch, she (Mrs. Clemmons) usually helped her mother with housework and cooking. She says the division of the work seemed to evolve naturally because she was not a very good horsewoman. The same holds true for the Clemmons's daughters, the oldest loving horses and riding. The two younger daughters help by riding in the fall when cattle are gathered, but the youngest daughter prefers to be indoors.

Asked whether the cost of labor has a significant impact on ranching operations in the area, Mr. Clemmons responds that it is a "big item," and that he is more concerned about the increase in the price of pickups, veterinary supplies, and feed.

Mr. Clemmons, asked if he has a manager on the ranch at Yeso, indicates that a family lives there and that the ranch, which is also owned by a partner runs eleven hundred head of cattle, half belonging to the Clemmonses and half to someone else. The manager there hires an additional employee during the winter months and if additional help is needed Mr. Clemmons sends someone from the Elida ranch where three employees care for about three thousand head of cattle. On one place in Lea County he has two employees caring for fifteen hundred cattle, and on a leased place in south Lea County, one man runs twelve hundred cattle with one or two men to help him during winter months. Normally one man can care for eight or nine hundred head most of the year if feeding is in bulk form out of a pickup. In emergencies or other heavy work situations personnel from one ranch will help out at another ranch. Bookkeeping paperwork is organized by Mrs. Clemmons and given to an accountant who keeps books and does tax paperwork. Mrs. Clemmons notes that she could spend half of every day in the office and not get caught up but that she doesn't because her family needs come first.

Asked if he felt isolated when he first moved to the ranch, Mr. Clemmons says "no," that the distance from others seems insignificant because he is accustomed to driving long distances, as much as two hundred miles a day several days a week and does his thinking and organizing and uses his cell phone behind the wheel of his pickup. Mrs. Clemmons notes that the family is very much involved with school, church, sports, and other activities. Mr. Clemmons comments that he is also a member of a board that lobbies for agriculture at New Mexico State University and that that involves going to Washington, D.C., a couple of times a year. He also notes that he goes to Santa Fe sometimes during legislative sessions and Mrs. Clemmons adds that they spent a week in November in Orlando, Florida, with the Carrot Board. Mr. Clemmons notes that things haven't changed much, that Mrs. Clemmons's father was on the go constantly when he ran the ranch. Mr. Clemmons comments that the Clemmons family sometimes drives hundreds of miles to sports activities to watch a nephew who plays basketball for the University of Oklahoma.

Mrs. Clemmons tells about starting to school in a one-room school in Kenna and then going to school in Elida for fifth grade when school consolidation began. The school at Kenna, at one time grades one through six, was fully consolidated with Elida three years after she moved to Elida. At one time there

was a high school in Kenna. Elida, at the time of the interview, had preschool through grade twelve. Kenna at one time was larger than Elida. Mr. Clemmons tells of having seen promotional literature from the early 1900s advertising the area as a water ski resort.

Asked if he had all the prerequisite skills when he first took over the ranch, Mr. Clemmons says he did not. Mrs. Clemmons comments on his intelligence and his willingness to take advice and to innovate. One of his innovations was an overhead bulk storage area for feed that caught on among other ranchers. Mr. Clemmons notes that he and Mrs. Clemmons started out on a smaller ranch the first couple of years before moving to the larger ranch.

Asked if her father had used a manager when he ran the ranch, Mrs. Clemmons say “no,” that though he was often gone during the day he was always home at night and that the family took few vacations. Mr. Clemmons tells of the father’s one-day trips to El Paso to buy cattle brought in from Mexico, noting that he liked to drive fast.

Asked if he finished his doctorate before he moved to the ranch, Mr. Clemmons says that he had finished his course work and was having difficulty completing his dissertation after moving to the ranch, but that with Mrs. Clemmons’s urging he did complete it. The dissertation topic compared personality traits of students at New Mexico Military Institute with traits of traditional community college students in Roswell. Mr. Clemmons notes that the Vietnam War was in progress and the military school was not very popular at the time.

Mrs. Clemmons comments that Mr. Clemmons misses academia a little. The conversation turns to her education as an elementary education teacher and her work in the registrar’s office at Eastern New Mexico University and then as registrar and director of admissions for the Roswell campus until moving to the ranch. Mrs. Clemmons notes that she works for the University on a contract basis supervising student teachers in the classroom.

The conversation turns to Mr. Clemmons’s involvement with the Museum Foundation. Mr. Clemmons says that his involvement was minimal, that when he first came aboard they were trying to pick a site for the Museum and there was some controversy that involved Bill Stephens and John Owens and whether the site was to be across from the New Mexico State University Ag building or somewhere along Interstate 40. Mr. Clemmons says that he thought at the time that maybe the Museum should be in Clovis or Tucumcari. The interview asks about the evolution of plans for the Museum building from metal shed to a more elaborate building, but Mr. Clemmons says that he was not involved in that part of the discussion. He comments on his interest in ensuring that ranching be made an important part of the Museum’s mission because of the important role ranchers have played in developing the state of New Mexico. He notes that the federal government in its census classifies ranchers with farmers, but he insists on their differences.

Asked if he was involved on the board at a time when board members were asked to sign personal notes to obtain land, Mr. Clemmons responds that he was not. Asked if fundraising was emphasized during his time on the board, he says that it was but there was also a push toward public awareness that increased opportunities for state support.

TAPE TWO, SIDE B:

Asked if the struggle to get private and public funding had been more difficult than he had expected it to be, Mr. Clemmons says that it had been and attributes the difficulty in part to tax law changes that eliminate some tax advantages for gift giving. Another contributing factor was a bad market situation in

agriculture. Mr. Clemmons says he had been involved in lobbying local legislators, working with Pete Davis from Clovis who had contacted him for help. Mr. Clemmons indicates that some of the difficulty involved in fund raising may have derived from the fact that the project was still at the idea stage without an actual building in existence. He also says that private gift giving might be motivated by recognizing families whose ranches and farms have been in their families for long periods of time.

Asked what they think should be the primary mission of the Museum, Mr. Clemmons talks about the importance of educating young people and then notes that we all like to look at artifacts. Mrs. Clemmons asks how artifacts are gleaned and the interviewer discusses people's generosity and problems involved in finding temporary storage, noting the importance of preserving histories as well as artifacts. She notes that an important interest at the moment is a temporary exhibit showing how the Museum idea has evolved over the fifteen years since its inception. She also notes that they're asking people they visit with for recommendations.

Mrs. Clemmons refers then to a set of audio tapes involving area old-timers, made about fifteen years ago and now in the archives of Eastern New Mexico University. One of the contributors was Jean Burroughs, wife of the former governor. The Clemmonses recommend ninety-year-old Leabelle (Sweety) Gainer from Tatum, who still runs her own ranches. Mrs. Clemmons notes that one of her student teachers has a tape she made for a class and will ask if she can borrow it for the interviewer.

The interviewer tells Mr. and Mrs. Clemmons that the tapes she makes will be archived at New Mexico State University. Mr. Clemmons asked if the tapes will be put on the internet, and the interviewer indicates that there are tentative plans to do this and that a fiber optic cable is being installed at the Museum.

Asked what his dream for the Museum five or ten years down the road would be, Mr. Clemmons says that it should be "a state treasure . . . for future generations." Mrs. Clemmons emphasizes the importance of having a "strong education program." Mr. Clemmons notes that the Museum can also be important in terms of tourism.

The interviewer thanks the consultants for talking with her and ends the interview.