

**NEW MEXICO  
FARM & RANCH  
HERITAGE  
MUSEUM**

**ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM  
INTERVIEW ABSTRACT**

CONSULTANT: Terrell Shelley

DATE OF BIRTH: June 14, 1947 GENDER: Male

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: May 12, 1998 and May 13, 1998

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: 916 Ranch, Cliff, New Mexico

INTERVIEWER: Jane O'Cain

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM  OTHER

TRANSCRIBED: Yes: November 23, 1998

NUMBER OF TAPES: Four

ABTRACTOR: Sylvia Wheeler

DATE ABSTRACTED: January 4, 2002

QUALITY OF RECORDING (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: History of the Shelley family and the 916 Ranch from the establishment of their homestead through four generations.

DATE RANGE: 1884-1998

## **ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):**

### **TAPE ONE, SIDE A:**

Terry Shelley lives on a ranch north of Cliff, New Mexico. He was born in Silver City, New Mexico, June 14, 1947. He wrote a book called *Pioneer Families of Grant County, New Mexico and the History of 916 Ranch* with his cousin, Laverne McCauley.

His great-grandfather, Peter McHenry Shelley and his brother Absalom, who changed his last name to Davis, came here in the early 1880s. "He wrote letters to P.M. Shelley, telling him he needed to come out here and see this country because of the grazin' land. So in the summer of 1883, P.M. Shelley came, looked over the country and liked it, went back to Bell County, sold his holdings, and brought eighty head of cattle, got his family and his wagons . . . and in the spring of 1884 they left Bell County, Texas, headed here and it took 'em three and a half months to get here." (P.M. Shelley had four children, including Thomas Jefferson [T.J.], the speaker's granddad. His wife was Emily Jane York Shelley.) On their journey across West Texas they ran out of water for the cattle and were in a desperate situation. That afternoon when they made camp it rained just in the immediate area. This allowed them to water the cattle and move on. Later, when they got to El Paso, the Rio Grande was high and they couldn't cross it so they put everything on the train and went to Deming. Unloading there, they started on the trail to Silver City. By Whitewater, a Cattlemen's Association representative stopped them and told them since they had Texas cattle, they had to turn around and take the cattle back because they "got tick fever and everything else." Shelley refused, stood his ground, and went on to Mogollon Creek and settled there. At first they lived in a dugout, in 1886 built a log cabin, and in 1887 they built a lumber two-room house to which they later added on. (P.M. Shelley was born in 1850, thus would have been in his thirties at the time of his arrival in New Mexico.)

They had a few neighbors on their place at Mogollon Creek. One day, they saw Indians out on the hill catching their horses. When P.M. Shelley came over the hill, he and the Indians shot at each other and went opposite ways. He eventually slipped back to the old rock house where Absalom Davis lived. Soon soldiers came their way and escorted the settlers back home. The Indians, a remnant of Geronimo's band, (occurred circa 1885) were the last American Indians in the area except for a few renegades like the Apache Kid. Around 1900 when his granddad, T. J. Shelley, and grandmother were first married, the Apache Kid would come around to get water out of their water tank at night. They lost some horses to the Indians. The Indians ate the horses, the remains of 250 or 300 butchered heads of horses were found in Tepee Canyon where they lived and which afforded them protection, grass, and a spring.

P.M. Shelley eventually established a farm at Cliff and may have helped start the Cliff Mercantile. He ultimately became the sole owner of the mercantile and as a result took ownership of many homesteads as payment on debts owed him. He felt that homesteading was too difficult for many given the condition, and also that big ranches paid homesteaders to take a claim and then turn them over to the ranches. At first 160 acres could be homesteaded, later it was increased to 480 acres (a full section). "Additional" refers to land a distance from the original homestead claim; this noncontiguous land made for inefficient farm units.

The consultant's great-grandfather put irrigation ditches in to bring water out of the river to the ranch. They grew alfalfa, corn, and oats (livestock feed). They had gardens for their own consumption. It was about fifteen or twenty years after they settled, around 1900, that they farmed.

His grandfather T. J. Shelley married Hattie Hooker of the Hookers who had come a year or so earlier than the Shelleys did and lived in the Gila Valley.

P.M. Shelley controlled seven and a half townships of land that he grazed cattle on. In the early years his property joined the L.C. Ranch. He had trouble with the L.C.'s cowboys who fenced off the water. At night Shelley's 916 cowboys would roll up the wire and pack it off. In controlling the water, they would control the adjoining land.

Shelley's family was dependent, in the beginning, on surface water like the Mogollon Creek and the Gila River and springs in some of the side canyons. When the Mogollon dries up (in the middle of June), it is only fifteen feet to bedrock but they didn't have hand-dug wells until the 1940s.

His grandfather T J was three years old when the family moved to the present day ranch headquarters. He was nineteen years old when he married Hattie Hooker at the old Scott place. Her father had raised her after her mother died young.

### **TAPE ONE, SIDE B:**

William, Mary Belle, and Ella were Thomas's older siblings. William was born in 1879 and he ranched, but mostly farmed. William had a farm of his own and he also helped with P.M. Shelley's operation; his father was busy with the mercantile. All the children married and had farms some of which were sold for their water rights in the early 1960s when the Phelps Dodge company surreptitiously bought eighty percent of the farms in the area and turned over the water rights to the Tyrone mine. The buyers bought through a holding company that was a subsidiary of Phelps Dodge. (The P.M. Shelley farm was sold earlier but Mary Belle's farm is still in the family as is the old Will Shelley farm.) These land sales changed the community from farming to residential. The very few remaining farmers have trouble maintaining the irrigation ditches. Some of the water rights are now being transferred from the mine back to the farms (wheat and small grain crops are raised for grazing not for cash crops).

Terrell Shelley thinks that there should be two different types of water rights, industrial water rights and agricultural water rights, nontransferable to one another. With industrial water rights so valuable farming is no longer profitable. Prior to the mine land buy-up, water right owners calculated how many acre-feet they would adjudicate for the basin. All water rights had to have a priority date. The consultant states that residential developments also increase water usage as the population grows in this part of the state.

A discussion of Shelley's great-grandfather's brokering cattle through the mercantile follows: the broker was in contact with different buyers because he was the major land or cattle holder. People would tell him the number of cattle they had for sale and he would combine them and sell them. The cattle would be driven to Silver City where the stockyards were located. He would see that everybody got paid through the store and keep all the sales receipts. He made a commission off each sale. Prior to the sale Shelley would hold the cattle in a field or pasture until there was a herd of fifty to seventy. He usually went along with the cattle to market. This would have been from about 1918 to 1926. They didn't sell heifers then, just steers; it was common to keep heifers until the 1920s or 1930s when it got so dry, and cattle were dying everywhere. In the mid-1920s an evolution occurred in raising cattle.

Shelley says that supplies for the mercantile were shipped in from Silver City and stored in a barn. Many men were hired to work at the mercantile. When P.M. Shelley died in 1935 the store

was closed. The ranch and the remainder of the estate were divided between John William, Mary Belle Rice, and T. J.; Ella had such a large bill at the mercantile that her portion of the estate went to settle that debt. The original homestead portion was included in T.J.'s inheritance. (T.J.'s children are named; Lawrence is the father of the consultant Terrell Shelley.)

### **TAPE TWO, SIDE A:**

In defining a "maverick", Shelley says it is a steer or heifer that's never been branded at a time when all the cattle ranged freely. He mentions that the Depression and drought coincided with the over abundance of heifers on the range. Following World War II ranchers were financially able to develop water resources with bulldozers, which led to a better utilization of the entire ranch.

Shelley says that his family was not much impacted by the Taylor Grazing Act because the majority of the land their land was private, although they leased some Forest Service land and some state school land. He says cattle were grazed on the land before the National Forest Service was established in 1906 or so. After the Forest Service was established a rancher had to own forty acres of private land to apply for a forest permit, and it had to be adjacent land.

When fencing of Forest Service land was mandated, they usually furnished all the material and the permittees did the labor. The commensurate property arrangement stated that an applicant must have a permanent water source and a set of corrals. Owning forty acres gave a rancher the rights to big forest allotments. The Forest Service charges an estate tax on the land allotment. Shelley believes the great change and tension between the Forest Service and ranchers has been since 1972. Ranchers are now asked to fence off the riparian areas. Environmental groups are protecting some endangered species. "Now, the majority of these lands (on permits for a ten-year period) are cut in half or three-quarters so you don't even know if you own anything to sell until you know what the Forest Service is going to do."

A permit is usually for a ten-year period, Shelley says, with the grazing fee set by the United States Congress. A rancher does not have to bid competitively against their neighbor. Otherwise, all the bigger ranches would outbid smaller landowners and put them completely out of business. State school land is bid competitively but the one who has leased it last has the final option. But like the forest permits, the person who wins the bid must own commensurate property. Small parcels of deeded land are scattered throughout Forest Service land. In some places, there are more than forty deeded acres. However, forty-acre plots are scattered all up and down the river bottom. Eventually these small farms or homesteads were brought out and a single landowner gained control of all the land. It's not easy to unravel ownership of Forest Service leases.

Shelley says that forest permits are going to become so unreasonably priced that people will subdivide the adjoining private land, this will make ranching impractical because houses will be located on all the creek bottoms. This type of development has already happened in Colorado and Arizona. The reason, he says, that a big fight's taken place over grazing fees is because the rancher who leases Forest Service land must pay for upkeep of fences and windmills and this, he believes, has not been adequately taken into account.

Shelley relates, "But I hate to see land subdivided because if you're going to ranch you can't where you got a group of houses right in the middle of you. The Forest Service will maintain some of their trails that go through, their main trails, but most of the ranch trails they don't maintain—if there is no roads there is no maintenance. Forest permit land is public land, people are there all the time. Logging roads go everywhere, but not on private land. Another change is

that the Service just lets the land sit if you lose your permit. Then the Nature Conservancy's bought some permits and the Forest Service bought another big permit on the Blue River and took the cattle off it. Nobody's running cattle. They have a lot of cattle up the river on what they call the Granny Benches and the Forest Service is trying to get them out now. There are cattle that have drifted in there from neighboring ranches and they've got mavericks all over again. They're trying to get somebody to go in but no cowmen want to. Now, they're trying to shoot them. The law reads that they belong to the state, anything unbranded. The state says they belong to them so they can't be shot."

**TAPE THREE, SIDE A:**

The interview continues on May 13, 1998. In Shelley's recall, his grandfather, T.J. Shelley, and others worked all through the year. In March they would gather their pack outfits and all go to the mountains and camp. They would stay a month at a time, work cattle, and then bring the cattle to the ranch to a big holding pasture. They would then go to a different area of the ranch for another month and so on throughout the spring and summer through fall until cold weather. When they had gathered a herd of cattle they would trail them to Silver City and ship via the railroad. In the late 1930s or 1940s they started hauling cattle in trucks. The consultant's grandfather T.J. tried to gather all the wild cattle out of the mountains to get rid of them and to raise enough money to get the estate out of debt. When they were able to start over they bought Hereford cattle from Will Henry.

Thomas Jefferson's four sons, Vernon, Lawrence, Worthington and Will all worked gathering the wild cattle. They didn't get paid until the estate was settled when they received a lump sum. They had a few cowboys working for the ranch at that time who stayed in the log house when they were not out with the cattle. (The Shelley's held a community allotment permit through the Forest Service. In 1946 or so, the Forest Service directed that these allotments be divided into individual permits.) There hasn't been a need for a great deal of outside help since the 1930s.

Shelley's father Lawrence took over management of his father's T.J.'s property on Mogollon Creek when he was no longer able to ranch. Later T.J. split his property amongst his three sons (Vernon died at a young age) and the consultant's father inherited the land on Mogollon Creek. Lawrence Shelley lived on that ranch from 1940 to 1947.

Shelley tells a long story about the killing of Aaron Inman's pigs. Inman wanted a horse permit on 74 Mountain. The Forest Service denied the application because it would infringe on the 916 permit. Inman, then, let loose 200 feral hogs in the area; Shelley's father started shooting the hogs and he describes the outcome of the conflict. (Inman had a criminal background, that of shooting Bog Ague, according to Shelley. He says Inman was tried and pardoned because of a bribe to the governor.) He also speaks of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid staying up there in that area, at the old WS ranch in Alma, a tough town.

After World War II things were hard, the cattle market was poor, his father went to work in the mine and later was a county commissioner for four years. He also worked as a security guard for the Kennicott mine and was well known in politics, ultimately becoming chief deputy for Sheriff John Tierney in the late 1950s. From 1961 through 1964, his father was sheriff, living in Silver City. His father also helped Terrell, and his older and younger brother run cattle.

Will and Worthington (Wordy), Terrell's uncles, ranched the old Hunter homestead on Mogollon Creek; although Will moved on, Wordy ranched there until he died. Will also ranched until he died at a place at the mouth of Turkey Creek (his sons took over the ranch and still own land).

Eventually the Nature Conservancy bought the land Wordy had ranched. Cattle are there but nobody looks after them.

Shelley speaks of the 1950s drought when it was too dry to run cattle. His father became sheriff though he later ranched again (he bought back cattle in 1964). Cattle prices were good until 1973 when they fell and Shelley started guiding hunters and outfitting.

Shelley's family started guiding in the early 1930s when ranchers had to pay a bounty for mountain lions to Ben Lilly, who was employed by the Biological Survey. So ranchers got hounds of their own and started hunting because it was cheaper to own and feed hounds than it was to pay a bounty.

### **TAPE THREE, SIDE B:**

The hunting business was started by Wordy, Will, Lawrence, and Vernon; they charged by the hunt. The Double S Dude Ranch started getting dudes from back east and they would book a hunt with them. Shelley's father, Lawrence, dropped out to ranch and Terrell picked up some of his old hunting customers. They have never advertised, just getting their clients by word of mouth. (When Terrell took over the ranch in 1972 it was again dry and prices were low; he remarks on the drought of the 1990s and 1930s.) Outfitting became a way of life in September, October and November; some years they would be in camp forty-five days, in the fall, between gathering and shipping cattle and guiding hunts. The last few years they have done less outfitting. Customarily, they guide two rifle elk hunts and three deer hunts. Tanya, Terrell's daughter, does all the cooking for the hunters. (Terrell married Charlene Stockton from Mule Creek in 1968; they have two children, Tanya and Gerald.)

Terrell and his father were both rodeo riders. Terrell joined the RCA in 1969 staying though 1972 after which he bought the ranch. You can't do both. Today, rodeoing has become a professional sport although they don't get paid very well. His sister, Joyce, rodeoed as did her husband Barry Burke. Shelley tells a few rodeo tales.

He tells of buying the ranch and cattle in 1972. Then he talks about his mother Rosemary Kirkland who came from San Antonio, Texas. From a city girl, she quickly became an able rural wife, keeping everything going at home and doing chores as well. Today, a lot of wives have taken jobs off the ranch to help out.

He speaks of the dude ranch Double S that was established by Sharpe and Shipley. Sharpe was married to Dickie Wilson, Base Wilson's daughter. Wilson was an old timer. They got in partnership with Shipley and bought land to build the dude ranch: a big old adobe bunkhouse and a main house where they fed people and could sleep eight to twelve dudes at a time. People came into Silver City on the train and ranch employees met the train and brought them out to the ranch. Activities at the Double S were a social outlet for neighboring ranch children. When the Double S was operating, they didn't raise cattle. Later, they did. They made little money on the dude ranch.

Shelley speaks of the Game and Fish Department starting a fish hatchery on the White Creek, the west fork of the Gila River. They raised fish to stock mountain streams, primarily for recreation. Edwin Shelley helped close that hatchery and move it to Glenwood in 1935 or so.

#### **TAPE FOUR, SIDE A:**

By the time Terrell's father's generation came along, a high school had been built in Cliff. Wordy was the only one of the brothers to graduate. Terrell's father left school in the eighth grade.

Shelley speaks of his great aunts, all of whom married cowboys or ranchers, Lucy is the only one left; she was born in 1908. He thinks two of his aunts finished high school. Of his generation, most attended college.

Shelley has ranched for twenty-six years and feels that ranching has become big business where a small rancher can't survive. However, one man can take care of more country now because of pickups and trailers (this started in his father's generation with stock trailers). Also the watering situation improved as they put in pipelines that can pump water three or four miles to various parts of the ranch. Shelley finally put in a diesel engine to pump the water – he can start the engine with fifteen gallons of fuel and it'll run for six days. The land, he feels, is more evenly grazed, and in a drought, they're better off. His cows don't have to go over a quarter of a mile to get water. In the winter he moves the cattle to the mountains. He tries to manage his breeding program, breeding his heifers to low-birth weight bulls in order to get small calves on first-calf heifers who then don't have to be watched as closely. He breeds mainly Brangus; they drive rather like horses and are easy to care for. Predominant grass types on the 916 Ranch are black grama, blue and side oats grama.

He feels that the worst droughts he's known occurred between 1991-1996. He's never fed his cattle hay or grain. "If you have to supplement cows, you've got too many." He markets through an individual buyer who buys calves in the fall or, if not, sends them elsewhere or puts them on the video auction. His primary work in the summer is to build pipe corrals; although land barriers provide some natural fencing; he also spends time riding, checking cattle. They brand at the home place by mid-May and brand cows elsewhere on the ranch by early June.

#### **TAPE FOUR, SIDE B:**

He speaks of the loss of New Mexican ranch land to subdivision and development. He tells of the few remaining early ranching families in the area, the Hookers, the Rices, the McCauleys, and the Henrys of Mule Creek. The Moon Ranch is still operating under the Spire's estate. There's not been much turnover among ranches, though there is a larger turnover in the forest permits in the last ten or fifteen years. He feels that wealthy people have bought the land, causing prices to escalate so high that people now here will not be able to afford it, towns will grow, and resources will be strained.

Shelley feels that his having been raised on a hard- working ranch and being treated in an adult fashion when he was very young, taught him to work hard unlike children today. He says that he didn't question adult authority.