



ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
INTERVIEW ABSTRACT

CONSULTANT: Dr. Gerald Thomas

DATE OF BIRTH: July 3, 1919 SEX: Male

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: November 20, 1996

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Thomas's office, NMSU, Las Cruces, New Mexico

INTERVIEWER: Jane O'Cain

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM OTHER _____

TRANSCRIBED: Yes: July 29, 1997

NUMBER OF TAPES: Two

ABTRACTOR: Jane O'Cain

DATE ABSTRATED: November 1, 2000

QUALITY OF RECORDING (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Briefly discusses his personal and work history. The majority of the interview details the founding of the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum.

DATE RANGE: 1919 - 1996

ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

TAPE ONE, SIDE A:

While Dr. Thomas was Dean of Agriculture at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas, he along with other faculty members became involved in establishing a ranching heritage institute. He was also interested in the archives, Southwest Collections, at Texas Tech University. Consequently, when he became president of New Mexico State University (1970) he was instrumental in establishing the Rio Grande Historical Collections to preserve New Mexico's documentary history. He also started discussions with Bill Stephens, Secretary of the State Department of Agriculture about establishing a farm and ranch heritage "program." When Dr. Stephens retired he continued to work on establishing an institute full time. In February 1987, a large meeting was held with many people from across the state who had an interest in preserving the history of New Mexico agriculture.

Thomas was born and raised on a "marginal" ranch in Idaho. He attended the local public school until tenth grade "when we ran out of a place to go to school." His mother took him, his brother, and another classmate to Pasadena, California, so they could finish high school. His mother was a schoolteacher so she was "bound and determined" that her children receive an education. His father, however, was not convinced that they needed much of an education, "to run this ranch."

After graduating from high school, Thomas completed a two-year junior college program in California, and then enrolled at the University of Idaho. During the summer months he worked for the forest service, and was working there when the United States entered World War II. He joined the navy.

After he was discharged from the navy, he went to work for the Soil Conservation Service. During this time he became very interested in the "wise use of natural resources" and the "preservation of our agricultural base." The other interest he developed was "world hunger" when he was assigned to work in Greece after World War II. He ties these interests to his being reared on a ranch in a semi-arid region of Idaho.

He married in 1945, and has three children. His undergraduate degree was in forestry but range management was his area of study.

TAPE ONE, SIDE B:

Thomas decided to pursue a graduate degree during World War II and did his graduate work at Texas A&M University. He earned the tenth Ph.D. in the United States in range sciences. Thomas retired from the presidency of New Mexico State University in 1984.

In discussing the founding of the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum (Museum), Thomas details some of the early ideas about placing the Museum within the College of Agriculture and Home Economics or under the State Department of Agriculture which is located at New Mexico State University (NMSU). It was the belief that if the Museum was placed within a university department it would be "competing for the same funds" as the department. There was also resistance on campus to placing the Museum under the State Department of Agriculture. There was discussion about siting the Museum at Fort Stanton, however Thomas "never ever gave up on" locating the Museum on or near NMSU. Once that decision was made there was also a great deal of discussion about where the Museum could be located on campus. One idea was to utilize the cotton-ginning laboratory; however, when the cotton ginning program was re-funded they began looking at the northwest corner of the university's property as a possible location for the Museum. This site was also rejected because it was a "high

priority” area for the College of Agriculture and Home Economics. The board of the heritage institute then began to consider a piece of university property near the State Police headquarters and the University Golf Course.

When Dr. Halligan assumed the presidency at NMSU he began negotiations with the State of New Mexico Office of Cultural Affairs to place the Museum under that agency. Thomas states, “. . . if I’d a still been president I’d of fought to put it in the Department of Agriculture because . . . we’re the ones that had the interest in it and everything, and we knew we could do it.”

After Dr. Stephens retired from the Department of Agriculture, Frank DuBois was “hired.” Although Thomas believes that DuBois supported the concept of establishing a Museum, he believes DuBois had “reservations” about taking on an “additional sector,” and “Dr. Halligan definitely had reservations.” So the decision was made to place the Museum under the Office of Cultural Affairs.

Some of the Museum’s supporters believed that a temporary headquarters in a metal building should be established for the Museum; however, “we were never even . . . able to raise enough for that.” Thomas states, “We didn’t necessarily have good leadership in the Office of Cultural Affairs (until Edson Way was hired), either, because in a way this was competitive with all their other activities, too.”

The consultant states, “. . . we knew that we couldn’t raise enough private money to pull this off. We had to have a state entity.” He reports that Dr. Stephens had “reservations” when Dr. Halligan placed the Museum under the Office of Cultural Affairs.

Thomas relates that private fund raising was difficult, in part because “farmers and ranchers were in pretty tough straits at that time, and they still are . . .” He was not surprised at some of the difficulty in getting public funding for the Museum through the legislature. Some of this difficulty related to the “domination of the legislature” by “Albuquerque/Santa Fe,” and that “southern New Mexico has generally been neglected.” Thomas credits G. X. McSherry’s work in sponsoring the legislation to establish the Museum, and Bill Stephens for all the work he did in gaining support for the bills.

Thomas is working on the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Foundation’s [foundation] commercial committee that will be involved in setting up the Museum’s commercial enterprises (restaurant, gift shop, and room rentals).

TAPE TWO, SIDE A:

Thomas discusses that it would be difficult to proceed very far with the work of the commercial committee until the foundation has “much more support staff.” At the present time the Department of Agriculture is providing staff for the foundation. Another issue of concern: “this business of what belongs in the foundation and what belongs in the Museum is, is still a little bit hazy in . . . my view.”

He states that G. X. McSherry should be interviewed and recognized for his contribution to the project. The foundation staff support is being provided “gratis” by the Department of Agriculture. Thomas states that NMSU “kind of had a commitment . . . [and] supports a lot of these activities.” But he states, “there’s a limit to that.”

Thomas does not believe that the controversy over the selection of an architectural firm to prepare drawings for the Museum building had any long-term effects on the development of the Museum.

When Thomas learned of Governor Gary Johnson’s plan to place the Museum under the Department of Agriculture in 1995, he contacted the Governor’s office. He was never able to meet with Governor

Johnson, but did meet with the lieutenant governor and told him, "this would be a bad mistake." He received a letter from Governor Johnson stating that he believed the Museum "should go back to the University [NSMU]." Thomas was told by the lieutenant governor that the University could manage the budget better than "that big complicated Office of Cultural Affairs."

Thomas believes that the preservation of records is the "most critical" aspect of the Museum's mission, although he recognized that "we're losing artifacts to deterioration . . . sale, or transfer." The consultant is glad that there is space at the Museum for permanent exhibits; however he is concerned about costs associated with exterior crop and livestock displays. He believes that the Museum could form partnerships with various departments at NMSU to offer the visitor the opportunity to experience these aspects of farming and ranching.

The consultant states that conflict between the Museum and foundation boards has not been a "problem, because the foundation has not been strong enough to have much impact." He sees the functions of each board as clearly delineated: the foundation's "responsibility is to raise money to carry out those programs." Thomas again discusses his thoughts about the foundation's administering the Museum's commercial enterprises.

Thomas states that it is important to recognize the contributions of all the individuals, "founders," who supported the Museum even peripherally. He states that legislators should be recognized as well.

He is not surprised that the development of the Museum took as long as it did, because he was involved in many capital projects at NMSU that were funded through the legislature. He believes the "evolution" of the Museum "has led to a better project than we had visualized at the outset." Thomas states, "It's gonna be one of the premier agricultural museums . . . in the country, no doubt about that."

TAPE TWO, SIDE B: Blank