

**NEW MEXICO  
FARM & RANCH  
HERITAGE  
MUSEUM**

**ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM  
INTERVIEW ABSTRACT**

CONSULTANT: Genevieve "Ginny" Burris Davis

DATE OF BIRTH: February 9, 1915 GENDER: Female

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: May 26, June 2, and July 18, 2003

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Davis residence in Albuquerque, N.M.

INTERVIEWER: Ramona L. Caplan

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM X HSR \_\_\_\_\_ OTHER \_\_\_\_\_

TRANSCRIBED: Yes: June 29, 2004

NUMBER OF TAPES: Six

ABTRACTOR: Ramona L. Caplan

DATE ABSTRACTED: August 2003

QUALITY OF RECORDING (SPECIFY): Excellent

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Speaks extensively on rural education, family ranch and farm home life, ranching community life, and successful cattle breeding. Discusses family's businesses, including managing the College Ranch [Jornada experimental range] for New Mexico State.

DATE RANGE: 1915 – 1980s

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

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

The consultant talks about her collection of her own paintings and those of other artists as well as how her son got his nickname “Rowdy”.

She talks about writer Lou Blachley, and how the family hired him to write a biographical sketch of her father L. Frank Burris, a well-known cattleman in Southern New Mexico. She discusses family genealogy and lists the nicknames for some family members.

Dock Burris was her grandfather. He was a Texas Ranger. He was born August 24, 1840 in Galveston, TX. L. Frank, her father, was born in 1871 (possibly 1868) in Beeville, TX. She recalls that her son “Rowdy” has Billy the Kid’s spurs. They were originally given to the consultant.

L. Frank had three ranches. Genevieve (“Ginny”) talks about her childhood. She recalls that she was an excellent pistol shot, even as a child. She tells of shooting a hawk out of the air with a .22 rifle and shooting a “chicken-stealing cat.” She talks about her pet bear named Mae West, that she bottled raised from a cub. When full-grown, the bear was kept on a chain at the service station, where it drank Coca-Cola and entertained customers.

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

The consultant tells how the bear got off the chain and got away. Ginny roped the bear onto the pick-up truck. Dick always carried a pearl-handled .45 pistol and shot the bear, as it was about to attack her, and saved her life.

Sister Margie did a complete genealogy on the family that is now recorded with the Mormon Church. She discusses the role of one of the family ancestors running messages in the American Revolution. She discusses *Trail Drivers of Texas*, a book with a chapter about Dock Burris. Lou Blachley’s genealogy (in his paper on L. Frank) was wrong on some facts. Ginny’s dad taught her to twirl rope and rope cattle.

Dick and Ginny bought a ranch in Winston, New Mexico from Mr. Roderick. Ginny discusses her time in Winston, how she drove the kids back and forth between Las Cruces and Winston. She recalls that they stopped radiator leaks with Bull Durham tobacco. The ranch was located between Beaverhead and Dusty. It was purchase din 1954. They lived in a 100 year old log cabin with no indoor bathroom. They tracked and captured wild bulls: one or two a day. Ginny rode a one-eyed horse named “Old Shorty”. They bought registered Hereford bulls with financing from a banker friend and ran 600 head on 60 sections consisting of ½ low country and ½ forest. In addition to this was a 30-section piece on the Continental Divide called “Kline Place”. They used this only in the summers.

Winston had only a few houses. They went to Hot Springs to shop for supplies, generally one to two times a month, saw movies, went to ice-cream parlor – always on Saturdays. They lived in Winston all summer. The kids played all day in tree houses in black walnut trees. The kids rode bareback – “they could get into trouble with saddles” (fall off or get caught in the stirrups).

Rowdy went rabbit hunting with his dad in the early evening after dinner. Doc Knickerson (veterinarian) came out to check animals, and camped and visited.

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

A discussion between Ginny and her son Frank (known to the family as “Rowdy”) takes place regarding Ginny and husband Dick’s first business, operating a service (gas) station outside Las Cruces. They began their first farming venture by securing a Federal Emergency Loan to buy 50 hogs. Eventually they had 600 hogs and a garbage contract at Holloman Air Force Base in Alamogordo. The garbage contract was like finding money in the road. They did not steam the garbage before the hogs ate it at that time. They found lots of silverware from the base in the garbage. Sold hogs for big profit and bought 50 head of cattle (mother cows); leased part of the Lazy E, the Burris home ranch, to run cattle.

Ginny’s father L. Frank Burris started crossbreeding 3/8 Angus and 5/8 Hereford. Ginny and Dick’s Santa Gertrudis breed was a cross between Hereford, Braemer, American Brahman, and Red Polled milking shorthorns (developed into all red, developed by King Ranch).

While Dick worked in Alamogordo, Ginny lived at Lazy E (ranch) with Rowdy and ran the ranch. She sat 3 year old son, Rowdy, on top of a post while she worked cutting the cattle (1945-46). Later, the government required steaming garbage to kill germs. Garbage was filled with the silverware soldiers did not want to wash, so they threw it away. The consultant believes this was around 1944.

Rowdy moved back to New Mexico three years ago, in 2000, from his ranch in Idaho, to help when his Dad (Dick) passed away. Although raised on the ranch, he was a banker for 20-odd years and had worked for Merrill Lynch. He was also a 100-ton sea captain and fishing guide in Alaska.

The consultant discusses their role in the Jornada Experimental Ranch, which conducted breeding, feeding and digestibility experiments with cows. Windows were inserted in the cows to observe the digestive process.

Rowdy attended Texas A & M and graduated with a Master’s degree in 1971.

Ginny/Dick left the Jornada Experimental Ranch and returned to Lazy E in 1973-74. They stayed about eight years. They turned it back from a “run-down dump to an oasis” again.

In 1978 they sold their Las Cruces ranch property (strip of land had been old Grover Davis farm). It was developed by Stahmann and is now hotels, motels, and restaurants.

Weldon Burris had wanted Ginny and Dick to improve the ranch. Weaning weights had been 325 pounds average. They brought it up to 500-600 pounds, with cash crop of little over 50%. In a few years it was 85-89% with 500-525 pound weights. Weldon Burris was the largest single private-owned cowman in New Mexico when he died. Ginny and Dick improved the herd. After leaving the Lazy E, they moved to Boise, Idaho, and then moved into a doublewide trailer in an orchard outside town. Fruit trees on property were cherry, peach, apricot, apple and plum and consisted of 20 acres of land.

### **TAPE TWO, SIDE B:** Blank

### **TAPE THREE, SIDE A:**

The consultant discusses grandfather Dock Burris- birth name: Benjamin Franklin. Was a confederate soldier in Civil War, was Texas Ranger. "The bronco he could not ride or tame was never foaled." Raised no hogs, only cattle. Also had a garbage contract at Douglas, Arizona.

Ginny had her own cattle when she married. She had "worked for them", her Dad branded 45-50 head for her. Each of the children had their own cattle. Oldest brother Frank W. "Buddy" drove 200-250 head of mother cows off the Lazy E when he married. He bought a ranch in Mountainair, New Mexico and ran 400-500 head of cattle. He was an engineer on Texas and Pacific Railroad at El Paso.

Lazy E Ranch was 250 sections. Dad saw that all his kids had cows. Brother John Howard was running HW Ranch (200) sections at Silver City for her Dad when he married. Bought a ranch. Weldon's widow still lives at Weldon's old ranch. Then Howard went to Van Horn Ranch (about 100 sections) just below El Paso.

Dick was not a "cow man"; Ginny made one out of him. Got garbage free through the government contracts. Bought 500 head of mother cows from profits selling hogs. Lazy E Ranch had 400 sections. Dad gave them a whole pasture for their cattle.

Dick bought Winston ranch with cash. Also kept their house in Las Cruces – Dick built it. Was used when the kids were in school.

Dick and Ginny knew each other in high school, but were not sweethearts, only friends. After high school, when Ginny was 24, they danced at country club and became sweethearts from then on. Ginny was born February 9, 1915 in Mertzon, Texas. Dad had a ranch there and all but the three oldest kids were born there. Was married in 1945. Dick was working for Standard Oil. Dad didn't want his kids working for "outside money" – "working for people" so they came to the Lazy E Ranch.

Dick sold cattle and made money at it. Bought a farm in Deming, improved it, and sold it. Grew cotton, alfalfa, and grain. Dick dug first irrigation well south of the Florida Mountains – not a bored, "drilled" well. Bought a motel in Las Cruces, the Doña Ana Courts (\$250,000). Sold it, made lots of money. Then bought little ranch in Deming, sold it, and made money.

Bought Winston Ranch in 1965; raised cattle up there. When they came back from Winston, Dick leased the New Mexico State University ranch for four or five years. The college asked him to. Dick worked on crossbreeding. Students worked on the ranch. Bought 250 head of mother cows. Calves weighed 600-700 pounds each; big calves. Ran them in different pastures, bought high-priced bulls. Good feedlot cattle. Feedlot operators from Texas came out, fought over his cattle, and wanted his calves because they weighed so much. Weaned them at nine months. Sold them and made "a handful of money."

Santa Gertrudis is part Braemer [American Brahman]; have Braemer blood, Red Durham and a little Hereford blood. They really gained weight in the feedlot. Put 300-400 head of cows in El Paso feedlots and did well.

Discussed Dad's leasing a pasture to them and helping them get 500 head of cows. There is no ranching in Dick's background; his daddy was an engineer for Phelps Dodge.

Discussed Dick's cousin, Stanley Jones – well-known musician. Dick and Stanley hung around together around Dawson and Las Cruces. Then Stanley worked at the Grand Canyon, met Walt Disney there, then he worked for Disney. Wrote "Ghost Riders in the Sky".

Genevieve was 24 and Dick was 25 when they married. Dick and Stanley Jones worked at local ranches before Stanley went to the Grand Canyon. Stanley used to call and come to see Dick's mother and daddy once. He is now dead.

Also raised top-quality Herefords at College Ranch [Jornada]. Dad raised Herefords and preferred them. Jornada Ranch was about 250 sections. Van Horn Ranch was about 200 sections. NOTE: The consultant said earlier in the interview that the Van Horn Ranch was 100 sections.

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

Ginny said the only thing that was important to her was being raised on a ranch, knowing cattle and riding with her dad. "He said he had six cowboy including Ginny." Her sisters were ladies. She wasn't; she was a cowboy.

Her dad leased government studs to breed with his 45-50 mares, sell them to Mexico for high price. He sold horses all over the United States. Made his money off cattle, though. Lazy E was sold to Weldie. Before Dick and Ginny returned to restore it, Lazy E ranch was overgrazed and the corrals were run down.

Old cows do not produce well. At eight or nine years old they have already had eight calves, and it is time to get rid of them. Sell them to feeders.

Genevieve's dad has a friend in Van Horn. Dave Garren and L. F. Burris produced the Hereford cattle.

Ginny is 89 years old and will be 90 next February 9<sup>th</sup> [2004]. Ginny says, "Everybody says I don't look like it, or act like it"

Discusses Dock and the fight he had with drunken men at "Deutchmens" dance when he was a Texas Ranger.

Discusses orphans her Dad raised and his charity to starving families. Dad picked up Albert hitchhiking, stayed with them. Eventually her Dad bought Albert a farm in Deming, "turned out to be one of the wealthy men in Deming." Took a kid whose parents offered him to her Dad. My mother patched their pants, bought them clothes in town and treated them like her children (boys they raised). They raised a total of twenty kids. They lived in a long adobe home with the hired help. Mother had a Mexican woman who worked for her for eighteen years.

Dick and Ginny ran about 700 head of mother cows. Sold hogs, bought cattle and raised the cattle in Winston. Ginny taught school there several years, five days a week, even though had not trained to be a teacher. Taught reading, multiplication tables, and geography. Genevieve recalls that she had two eighteen-year old students in grade three. Ranch was 16 miles to Winston, 65 miles to Hot Springs. They could not afford cowboys so Dick and Ginny gathered cattle themselves from the canyon. Had daughter Roseanne then. Went to Hot Springs every two weeks for groceries. Raised roasting [corn] ears, squash, tomatoes, cucumbers. It was not fun; it was hard work. They talk now about what "we used to do."

Discusses saddle and memorabilia that Rowdy may someday donate to the Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum. It will take about six months to a year before he gets to it. Have extensive genealogy records we can look through. Rowdy has family tree back to 1500, 1600 (big document also in storage). Will look for genealogy document his aunt researched, created. She has no ranch records.

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

Ramona Caplan explains the release forms and gets them signed by the consultant. A discussion follows regarding the house in Las Cruces. It was made of brick and stucco. Roseanne started first grade in Winston; Rowdy was in sixth grade there. The house in Deming was rented. The Winston house was a log cabin. The consultant drove the kids to school in Winston because there was no school bus. Most of the kids were logger's kids who lived in Winston. Mrs. John Moore was the other teacher.

The consultant lived in a brick house in Las Cruces while at Jornada [College Ranch]. During the winter in Las Cruces, the kids played with friends. Later, Rowdy helped his Dad.

In Boise, Idaho Dick and Ginny had an orchard at Emmet (30 miles from Boise). They moved from Boise to a mobile home in the orchard and took care of the fruit trees. They moved to Boise in 1986, bought the orchard in 1987 and lived in Idaho until 1990 or 1991. They returned to Albuquerque. Ginny has been in Albuquerque, living in the house, about ten years now. The consultant states that the most important thing in life that she values is the closeness of the family. She recalls that her Dad said "someday water's going to be more important than food."

The consultant states that people are a little more selfish now than in her Dad's time. There are still some good ranch people. Ginny says that it has been a great life; that she has loved the hardships and the stock of people. She is glad that her kids were raised up on a ranch, that that life style gives you reality.

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

#### **TAPE FIVE, SIDE A:**

Ginny was like a mother to youngest sister Margie, the baby of the family, and they are very close. Walter "Toodles" was three years older than Margie. There were eight children; five boys and three girls. Margie wrote an article, "Her Life Story" and did the genealogy (listed in Mormon records; Rowdy has a copy in storage, but it is currently unavailable).

Ginny gave the following documents to the Museum to photocopy:

- a copy of a card that Rowdy gave his Dad
- a copy of the *El Paso Times* article written by L. Frank Burris about Franklin D. Roosevelt
- a photo of L. Frank (Dad)

Ramona Caplan gave Ginny copies of:

- Blachley's interviews/notes from CSWR Collection
- Entry on L. Frank and wife from *Encyclopedia of New Mexico* with photos of Ginny's parents.

The items were discussed along with topics not completed in prior interviews. The consultant discusses the education of her children. Roseanne went to university in Las Cruces. Rowdy did

also, and attended Texas A & M. Ginny's schooling was "very small" living on a cattle ranch, but she did finish high school. Ginny drove 25 miles each way (50 miles round trip) to Las Cruces Union High School. She started elementary school in Texas and moved to New Mexico in 1924. Finished sixth grade at Cambray (Lazy E Ranch is in Cambray).

In Texas her parents had ranch on Middle Concho River. Big schoolhouse (4 or 5 teachers) was in Mertzon, fifteen miles away. Mother moved there during the school year; Dad bought lot and built a little house (five bedroom) on it. Older sister and brother graduated high school in Mertzon. Five Burris kids attended Mertzon school, about 30-40 students in total. They lived on the ranch in the summer. Moved to El Paso and little sister (six years younger) started kindergarten in El Paso. Ginny was in sixth grade. Brother (three years older) went to El Paso High School (Dad was dissatisfied with the local school) for three years. Then Ginny attended Las Cruces and graduated from high school. She went to UTEP (Texas Western College) but did not finish because all the boys left home, so she went home to help Dad. "Mother was a queen."

On the old lake at headquarters they found Indian arrowheads, broken pottery and teepee rings. It was an area where the Indians used to camp, the only water in the country, and when it dried up they would find things. Ginny gave Rowdy a bunch of arrowheads, probably Apache.

The consultant discusses the various ranches that her father and uncle owned, the size of each ranch in sections, and how the boys had operated each of them at some point. She also discusses cowboys (working hours and wages), various camps, the chuck wagon and the fact that she made biscuits at a line camp when she was nine years old.

#### **TAPE FIVE, SIDE B:**

The consultant continues the discussion regarding the cowboys, chuck wagon and branding routine.

The consultant discusses how the rancher's business is to breed his cattle so that they come off at one time so that branding can be done at one time in the summer. It took real planning. When the calves were old enough, buyers from Kansas would come and fight over the calves. She recalls that trucks were not used very much to ship cattle. The railroad had a large shipping corral that would hold two to three thousand head located about six miles from the ranch.

Sometimes, Ginny recalls, she got attached to the calves. Ginny had 20 dogies (motherless calves) at one time. Dad bought milk cows to suckle the calves. If he did not have enough mothers, they bottled milk and fed them by bottle. Ginny raised them. Her brother raised another twenty, too. Then Dad sold them, gave the kids \$40 or \$50 for nursing them. Ginny did this from 9-15 years old. All the kids did it.

Did not grow grain for livestock. They had no farmland; it was all pasture. Bought grain for saddle horses and supplement, alfalfa and cow cake for weaned calves. Had 200 sections of grass, well watered in nice season. Could ride through "up to your knees, the grass was so good." In winter, they fed on range. Did not buy much grain – good cowman could juggle it, manage it. Success was due to cowhands rotating cattle through different sections.

At first, had kerosene lamps for long time. Dad bought Delco generator that ran electric lights, refrigerator and a radio. Listened to the news on radio. Had one refrigerator "Mother was so proud of." Not everybody had a Delco, was expensive, maybe \$1,200-\$1,500. Ginny was 11 or 12 years old (1926-27). Got powered electricity "not many years ago."

Neighboring ranches were 10-15 miles away. On Friday night families (maybe 12-15) would come down – “Mother would always have a feast for them,” sit around table listening to radio (maybe long as a modern dining room table). Only her oldest brother touched or ran the radio. No talking – “didn’t want to lose one word off that radio.” Listened regularly to “Amos and Andy” and musical shows – “hoe downs” (fiddle and guitar). Burris’ hosted live “hoe downs” (country-western music) once a month at ranch. Neighbors came, Mother fed them all at big table. Huge front porch with cement floor was full of people. Went to different dances at other ranches. Later on, had country club dances. Cowboys would go, too.

Not active in church, but Mother went on Sundays. Went to dances in Model-T Ford. Papa said it was foolish to drive Model-T 35 miles to dances, just “have the dance here.” He built a bunkhouse, sometimes had 200-300 people at the “hoe downs.” Would BBQ maybe half a beef. They fed the neighbors; “they didn’t have to bring their food.” Ginny helped cook.

Mother dressed in long skirt, always wore a white blouse. “If Mother showed too much of her legs, Dad would really correct her.” Daughters didn’t show legs either (Ginny wore Levis most of the time).

At “hoe downs”, with the half cow, Mother cooked fried potatoes, vegetables and fruit (Dad traded for beef) and kept in cold storage cellar, with jelly etc. It had a fireplace – sat around popping and eating popcorn. Cozy – “the biggest happiness room.” “That was our pleasures.” The consultant remarks “I think back and it was wonderful”, despite the hardships.

Dad took in the homeless boys and adopted about eight kids. The little Bartland boy [Billy] they adopted had given his family some trouble. Mother offered to raise him. Billy’s family had been hard on him. He was raised as Ginny’s little brother. Billy finished grammar school, left high school to join the Navy. He came to see them once (“loved my Mother, loved my Daddy”). His ship went down during World War II; Navy officially notified Mother and Daddy.

Family had three meals a day. Had meat all the time but did not have refrigeration all the time. Side of beef hung all winter in screen-in room, frozen. Mother baked bread. Dad traded meat with townspeople for vegetables and fruit. For her kids, Ginny cooked fruits, vegetables, biscuits, rolls and beans. Favorite meals: stew, fresh bread, biscuits, pies and cakes (Mother baked 3 or 4 at a time), cookies (Mother “made the best cookies in the world”). Mother married when 17 and had 9 children. Her father was an M.D.; her mother was a merchant. “All she wanted was a family.” She died at age 65.

### **TAPE SIX, SIDE A:**

More conversation about the homeless kids they took in. They came from off the road, going to Arizona or California trying to get work. Brought them to the ranch, fed them. Loved with them until grown men. “My Daddy was a great person. My mother and daddy were great persons, they had a heart for everybody.”

“He called her Mama. Her name was Avie” – like Ginny’s sister. She called him Frank (or Daddy “to us children”).

After Mother died. Daddy lived with Ginny “a lot” and with two of her sisters, (one of whom is in New York and was administrator of Manhattan General Hospital. But didn’t like New York City, “country boy” came home. “Lived with me the most.” But still ran the “E Ranch.” When he

was older, Dad lived at her brother's big HW Ranch – “went to help my brother out.” But he died at 86 on the Lazy E Ranch.

A discussion regarding Ginny's photographs ends the interview.