

**NEW MEXICO  
FARM & RANCH  
HERITAGE  
MUSEUM**

**ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM  
INTERVIEW ABSTRACT**

CONSULTANT: Loris Ward / John Wenk / Mildred Wenk

DATE OF BIRTH: 1926 / 1931 / unknown GENDER: Female/Male/Female

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: October 10, 2000

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Wenk residence, Albuquerque, N.M.

INTERVIEWER: Cameron L. Saffell

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

TRANSCRIBED: Yes: January 30, 2001

NUMBER OF TAPES: One

ABTRACTOR: Saffell

DATE ABSTRATED: April 16, 2001

QUALITY OF RECORDING (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Description of the Wenk Family asparagus farm operation and vegetable farming in the South Valley of Albuquerque from the 1920s to the 1980s. Focus in middle portion of interview on use of German POWs to help harvest asparagus.

DATE RANGE: 1920s - 1980s

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

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

Loris Ward describes the family history (parents Carl and Pearl Wenk) and how they came to the Albuquerque area. Three kids: Eris (b. 1924), Loris [Ward] (b. 1926), and John (b. 1931). Mildred Wenk (Eris's wife) talks about how she married into the family. Farm was in vicinity of Mildred's present house, always was asparagus as far back as any of them could remember. Can plant it and carefully manage it and it will last more than twenty years. Harvest season was from April to June. Had to stop when it got hot. Cut it off just below the ground when it was six to eight inches tall. Had to be harvested every day. Cuttings were taken to a central processing shed (where Mildred worked) to clean and bundle for sale. Discussion of how many other workers were hired to help. Shipped asparagus to Safeway for sale in El Paso and Albuquerque areas. Workers paid probably by the day or hour, rather than by amount harvested (bushels).

Begin discussing the local POW camp. No recollection of how farmers found out POWs were here or available. Eris and Carl frequently spoke with county agent. Wenks employed the POWs in 1945, after Loris graduated. Eris took a truck to pick up and return the POWs every day. All Germans at farm. Heard Italian POWs did work cleaning ditches. Carl kept the farm books, so all were unclear on how much and by what means POWs were paid. Did not give any extra cigarettes or perks. Pearl did fix big containers of creamed asparagus to supplement the POWs cold-cut sandwiches they brought with them. Had guards out to the house frequently. POWs were very good workers. Eris showed them how to cut the asparagus, that was the extent of their training. Some post-war correspondence with a former POW, "Henry."

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

POWs did some other regular farm work besides harvest asparagus; worked for about 9-10 months at their place. Got along well with each other and with Wenks. Looked healthy and well taken care of. Discussion of other area producers who used POWs. Mildred was initially nervous about having POWs working in field nearby to her home where they harvested cauliflower, but had no reason to be because "they were gentlemen all the way." Mildred insists the POWs were not coddled, they were just like "our boys," forced into fighting when they did not want to. Missed their families and wanted to go home. Were an asset during the labor shortage. Helped keep Eris from having to serve; he was drafted, but got an agricultural deferment. Discussion of where the camp was located and whether anything remains and of the Schwartzman enterprises.

Loris had several pictures of guards from the camp, which were discussed. Also some pictures of Eris or John in the asparagus fields. [Photos borrowed and copied: archived at Rio Grande Historical Collections, New Mexico State University.] Family leased much additional land to raise other vegetable crops. Carl died in 1981, Pearl in 1994, and Eris in 1992. Mildred does not recommend anyone go into vegetable farming; too work intensive, seven-day-a-week job, and all money goes to government and employers.

In final anecdote, Mildred relates story about a POW who took a walk during lunches and picked ladies underwear off of neighbors' lines so he could take them home to his family.