

**NEW MEXICO  
FARM & RANCH  
HERITAGE  
MUSEUM**

**ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM  
INTERVIEW ABSTRACT**

CONSULTANT: George S. Sisneros

DATE OF BIRTH: May 21, 1918 GENDER: Male

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: September 22, 2007

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Sisneros home in Roswell, N.M.

INTERVIEWER: Rick Hester/Marcie Palmer

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

TRANSCRIBED: No X

NUMBER OF TAPES: Two

ABTRACTOR: Donna M. Wojcik

DATE ABSTRACTED: October 17, 2007

RECORDING QUALITY (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Farming and ranching in the area around Arabela, N.M.

DATE RANGE: 1918-2007

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

NOTE: *[Additional information/clarification provided by Mrs. Sisneros post interview.]*

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

The interview begins with a discussion regarding the [*Sisneros*] family genealogy, and the location of the current family ranch. [*Sisneros*] family ancestors arrived in New Mexico from Spain as part of the Coronado Expedition and landed in Vera Cruz, Mexico. They followed the Rio Grande to Colorado and drifted back down to southern New Mexico, forming small communities near a good water source along the way. They [*Francisco Pacheco*] arrived in the Lincoln area in the mid-1800s and started a ranch at Three Rivers. Although they did well, they returned to Lincoln. [*The Sisneros' settled in Zuni, the Rio Arriba area of San Juan, Belen, Manzano, and Lincoln.*]

Sisneros' stepfather [*Leopoldo Pacheco*] did not like Lincoln because his father had bought five hundred head of ewes to run in an area without water. [*Sisneros' stepfather did not like Lincoln because as a boy he had to herd his father's sheep over the steep hills with only hand-woven sandals to protect his feet.*] George's father left Lincoln to look for a job when he was eighteen years old and got a job working at a cattle camp [*the Block Ranch*] on the north side of the Capitan Mountains in the mid-1890s. He worked on the commissary board [*worked in the commissary*], which was in charge of issuing provisions to the cow camps. [*From there he moved on to Arabela and took 500 old ewes in "partido" (shares) with Jesucito Maez. Three years later he returned 500 young ewes to Maez as payment. This was the start of his ranch.*] He eventually opened a cantina in Arabela and did well. He opened a second business - a mercantile that sold everything that was needed by the area residents, including clothing, shoes, hardware, and equipment.

The local community would cut wood, and take it to Roswell by wagon to sell. They supported the mercantile by returning to Arabela with supplies for the store. They were paid for bringing freight back to the mercantile.

Homesteading families were often not successful. George's dad [*stepfather*] would buy the patent and take over the land. By doing this, he was able to increase his ranch land and allow for better grazing areas for the sheep. George recalls that his stepfather once bought three hundred old ewes with a share partner; within three years he returned five hundred young ewes to the partner. [*Similar to a partido contract.*]

George's father was the postmaster at Arabela; and for this reason, he was kept out of WWI. He would often let community families purchase groceries on credit, and he was well liked. He purchased a fifty-five section ranch, which he left to his children [*He eventually controlled 52 sections of grazing land, most of which was deeded, which he left to his children.*] He would run approximately 12,000 head of sheep and 250 head of cows. In the early days there were no fences. Herders were used to move the sheep and keep them safe. There was generally one herder and one cook for every 500 sheep. Three burros were used to get supplies from the store to the sheep camp every two to three weeks. There was one sheep camp overseer for all over the camps.

There is a discussion regarding the naming of Arabela. It was originally known as Los Palas or "The Shovels" in reference to the shovels left behind after mining for gold and silver ceased in the area. [*NOTE: New Mexico Place Names by T. M. Pierce states that the original settlement was called Las Tablas, or "boards" in reference to the lumber used in building the settlement.*]

Prominent families in the community when Sisneros was young included the Sanchez, Aguilar, Anaya, Sedillo and Romero families.

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

The discussion regarding the naming of Arabela continues. George remembers that community residents would sit outside the store on a cement block and tell stories. Crops grown in the area were cane, corn, watermelon, cantaloupe, and feed. The work was done with mules, and it was hard work. Local residents also had home gardens and grew pinto beans, corn, and other vegetables.

Water supply for sheep was from dirt tanks and wells. Water was hauled to the sheep camps on wagons, in tanks that would hold 500 to 1,000 gallons of water. In the Arabela area good water can be found thirty feet below ground. Well water was often hauled to homes.

Sisneros remembers that his dad would get twenty-five cents a pound for wool, and lambs were sold for thirty cents a pound. His dad did not "make a killing, just a living." The sheep market today brings five times what George's dad got. Today, wool is around \$1.20 per pound and lambs are about \$1.30 per pound. The cost of living is more expensive now, and the sheep industry today is in decline.

Terrain in the Arabela area is good for sheep. There are rolling hills with deep canyons, and it is all good grazing country. The weather is perfect because the snow melts on the south slopes, and the sheep are able to get feed. There is little natural running water in the hills, although there are a few small springs that run short distances.

At the time when sheepherders were in use, there were no fences. In 1932, the ranch began building sheep proof fences around the pastures. A typical pasture was 2 ½ to 5 sections. Extra workers were needed to erect the fences. There were no steel posts in those days, so posts were made of juniper or cedar. It was hard digging the postholes, and a sledgehammer and bar were used. Once the fences were erected, herders were no longer needed.

The sheep were grazed on Cacti Mountain [*on the top of Capitan Mountain*] for three months. Little water was needed, as the morning dew provided enough water. Generally, one thousand ewes and one thousand lambs were taken to the mountain to graze. The lambs came back down the mountain weighing 90-100 pounds. The ranch hired men to look after the fences and two trappers to hunt for predators such as mountain lions and coyotes. At the time the first fence was erected, the trappers were paid \$15 per coyote and \$10 per mountain lion in addition to a salary. Bears were another predator, although they did not become a problem until later.

Lambs were branded at 2 to 2 ½ months old. Their ears were branded and cut and their tails were docked. The Circle 8 was branded on the left hip of cattle. In October the lambs were taken to market. Cattle grazed with sheep works well. The sheep eat the short grass, and the cows eat the tall grass. One of the poisonous plants that cattle and sheep ranchers need to be wary of is the *sacahuista* plant, commonly known as bear grass [a member of the agave family]. The seed is worse than the plant itself and will kill a yearling calf or lamb.

Government programs are discussed, in particular the Soil Conservation Service, which protects the land against erosion, cedar, and cactus growth. It also helps with water establishment issues such as water lines and tanks for distributing water to pastures so that the animals do not need to travel so far for water, salt, and minerals. They were very cooperative with ranchers.

Trips to Roswell for groceries took place every fifteen days. Salt pork was kept in a shed. At the time, it was a five-day trip to Roswell and back with a wagon. A typical wage for that time was \$25 to \$30 a month.

At twelve years of age, Sisneros did house chores and hoed the garden. He recalls that he spent the summer with the ranch foreman, and rode horses every day. The foreman was a good cook and Sisneros remembers that a typical breakfast was biscuits, potatoes, gravy and beans.

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

Sisneros went to school in Arabela up to the third grade. It was a two-room schoolhouse. His mother moved to Roswell when he was in the fourth grade, and he graduated from Roswell High in 1938. He attended the New Mexico Military Institute until 1940. He enrolled in the University of Arizona and attended for one semester. He volunteered for active military duty and was away from home for 4 ½ years. He served in the Mule Pack Artillery, with a brief stint in bombardier school. He recalls his time in the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division before going overseas to Italy. He returned to Fort Bliss, Tex., for a month furlough and was discharged from service.

Talk of the ranch continues. Sisneros recalls that there were not many accidents on the ranch with the exception of a few animals that were bitten by snakes while grazing. A typical evening meal was beans, potatoes, rice, bread, and meat.

The area Spanish residents celebrated two holidays: Santa Anna [celebrated on July 25, 26], and San Juan [celebrated on June 24]. There was horseracing, sodas, and ice cream. [

The only avenue for news in the community was the radio and the paper they picked up when they went to town. Local teens met through dances and parties that featured local musicians. There were some fights, and bootleg whiskey known as “white mule.” There was no church in the area, but the Catholic priest would come from Carrizozo every three months. The rosary was said at home every Sunday.

The Wool Growers Association and Cattle Growers Association helped the sheep and cattle businesses to work together for the good of the industry and helped them to get government help and protection.

Sisneros’ fondest memories of childhood are his friends, school, working on the ranch, and being a rancher’s son. Another fond memory was Christmas, when he got oranges, candy, nuts, and one toy.

The greatest hardship was through the Depression years. Many residents moved away in search of work, and it was hard on the community. When asked what the greatest impact for ranching was, Sisneros states that it was the assistance from government programs. He believes that the quality of life was better then than now because today the costs are more than the profit. Small ranches cannot compete with large corporations. So what does the future hold? Agriculture is the backbone of every nation and if our nation does not realize that we [United States] can grow everything we need, then we are in trouble. George believes that the sheep industry will disappear sooner than cattle ranching will, but cattle growers are having trouble as well. “Without agriculture you won’t survive,” he says.

There is a brief discussion about the burial places for his birth parents and the Pacheco’s, who raised him.

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

George thanks the interviewers for recording his story.