



ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
INTERVIEW ABSTRACT

CONSULTANT: Whit Harvey

DATE OF BIRTH: 1938 GENDER: Male

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: March 13, 2008

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Harvey residence in Las Cruces, N.M.

INTERVIEWER: Donna M. Wojcik

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM OTHER _____

TRANSCRIBED: No

NUMBER OF TAPES: Two

ABTRACTOR: Donna M. Wojcik

DATE ABSTRACTED: April 9, 2008

RECORDING QUALITY (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Cotton ginning business in Las Cruces

DATE RANGE: 1926-2006

ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

TAPE ONE, SIDE A:

The interview begins with a discussion regarding the Harvey family's first arrival in New Mexico. Grandfather Harvey traveled from Hillsboro, Tex., in 1923 after hearing that the Mesilla Valley was going to be one of the biggest farming communities in the state once the dam [Elephant Butte] was built. He drove a Model-A car, traveling on dirt roads all the way. When he had seen the area he returned to Hillsboro and convinced Harvey's parents to join him in Las Cruces. He had been impressed with the prospects of irrigation in the Mesilla Valley, since the Hillsboro area was all dry-land farming.

The B.E. Harvey cotton gin was built in 1926 but burned to the ground in 1927. It was rebuilt in 1928 and has remained at the original location along the railroad tracks in Las Cruces. Early Stahmann Farms is discussed. Most of the farms produced cotton, but hay and some orchard crops were also grown.

The Anderson, Clayton and Company [A large buyer, seller, storer and shipper of raw cotton; see fact sheet in interview folder] came to New Mexico apparently for the same reasons as the Harveys. After Anderson, Clayton and Company folded and left town, Harvey's father built a gin next to the Anderson, Clayton [& Co.] gin site on Compress Road.

The main variety of cotton grown in the Mesilla Valley was [Acala] 1517 [a short staple upland cotton variety]. It produced good quality cotton and grew well with irrigation.

The Harvey Gin is located near the old railroad station in Las Cruces. When the gin was built, there were not any other buildings around it, and it was "out in the bushes in those days." Main Street was all that was here in Las Cruces. The town eventually grew out towards the gin. Anderson, Clayton and Company already had a gin located on Compress Road when Harvey's grandfather and father arrived in Las Cruces. The Harvey Gin did good business, and Harvey's father was well liked and had an easy temperament.

Prior to coming to New Mexico the Harvey family owned gins in Texas, at San Elizario and Isleta, as well as a cottonseed oil mill at Clint. Anderson, Clayton and Company also had oil mills south of El Paso.

At one time the Holly Sugar Company purchased land along the railroad tracks with the idea to grow sugar, but this area does not get enough moisture to grow sugar.

The Harvey Gin was an independent gin. The machinery in the Harvey Gin was upgraded to allow the gin to process cotton faster. When the gin ceased operation in 2006, there was still equipment in it that had been in the gin when it was first opened. The original office was used from the time the gin opened in 1926 to the day it closed in 2006. There is a brief discussion about the cotton presses and rollers.

In 1963 the old gin was converted from a saw gin to a roller gin. Another gin had been built in 1949 across the street from the existing gin because there was so much business. This was the most modern gin for its time. There is a discussion about the difference between saw gins and roller gins. The Clint oil mill was closed in 1967. Oil mills are virtually a thing of the past. Today, the whole cottonseeds are used as feed in local dairies.

In the early days of cotton ginning, eight to ten (not counting the truckers) workers were needed to operate the gin. With two gins running, the Harvey gin employed approximately twenty-five employees. Eight to ten of these were employed for the full year, and the remainder were seasonal employees. Today, modern gins can operate with approximately six employees.

In the 1920s mules pulled the one-bale or two-bale trailers with wooden wheels to the gin. The wagons were lined up and processed on a first-come, first-serve basis. The farmers waited in the gin office for the

cotton to be weighed and ginned. In those days, the gin started operating in August when handpicking began. Now the gins do not start ginning until October. The cotton trailers of the 1920s were later converted to allow tractors to pull them. Sometimes the cotton trailers would arrive at the gin on fire as a result of flying sparks from the tractor's exhaust pipes. Trailers eventually got larger and were pulled by trucks. Now there are the module makers. The farmer no longer needs to take his crop to the gin. The gin picks the cotton modules up directly from the farm.

Stick matches were always a problem. If matches fell into the cotton trailer, the matches would ignite when the cotton was sucked up into the gin. That was the cause of the fire that burned the Harvey Gin in 1927. The gin began to furnish book strike matches to the farmers in an effort to prevent fires at the gin. The original gin was built of wood and had a tin roof.

Harvey's father purchased cotton directly from the farmers. Harvey's father stopped buying cotton in later years because of the competition with banks, and the amount needed to make the purchases. There is a discussion regarding the boll weevil and infestations over the years.

Early cotton prices are discussed, as well as the steps involved in processing cotton once it arrived at the gin. The higher the grade of the cotton, the more money the farmer received.

There is a discussion regarding the sale of cotton to textile mills before the [U.S.] Department of Agriculture (USDA) began monitoring the cotton process. Today, cotton samples are taken from the gin and sent to the USDA for grading.

The module maker concept is discussed.

TAPE ONE, SIDE B:

Defoliation sprays have improved cotton-picking procedures because the fields now only need to be picked once. Defoliation opens the bolls and allows the cotton to dry [Defoliation also causes the leaves to fall off].

Harvey discusses the pros and cons of bringing modules to the gin to store as opposed to leaving them at the farm until they are ready for processing.

The impact new cotton varieties have made on the industry is discussed. Bio-cotton varieties are briefly talked about. The Harveys have been active in the New Mexico Cotton Ginners Association and the Mesilla Valley Cotton Growers Association.

Harvey believes that the cotton industry is in decline because of the developing of agricultural land for housing.

Harvey discusses his childhood recollections of Las Cruces. He attended Alameda and Central elementary schools. He attended military school in Denver, Co., from the seventh grade to the twelfth grade. He attended two years of college but never finished because he had always wanted to be a cotton ginner. Since he was mechanically inclined, he used his skills to keep the gin in good running order.

Various topics are discussed: urban renewal and the changes to the downtown area; the tourism draw of Billy the Kid and all things related to him; importing produce from other countries; and the future decline of water for agriculture as the city grows.

When asked what he feels the future of the cotton industry is, Harvey believes that it is "almost history." He feels that the Mesa Co-op [Gin] will close, and farms of under ten acres will be all that is left. The pecan farmers will be fine as long as water holds out, but he feels that within the next five years all of the wells in the area will be metered. Once you have used your allotment of water, the water supply will be shut off. Harvey asserts that this is happening in Roswell today.

TAPE TWO, SIDE A:

Harvey has had a pretty good life. He did not want to go to military school but was glad that he did. He feels that this is what is needed for youth today because it teaches you discipline and how to get along with your fellow man.

Several men impacted his life. Two uncles and a rancher named J.A. Brown were especially influential. J.A. Brown was hard on Harvey, but told it like it was, and Harvey admits that he is the same as J.A. Brown in that respect.

The future of the Harvey Gin is discussed. Harvey is currently leasing out the property and has heard some interest from the [Doña Ana County] Historical Society in purchasing one block near the railroad tracks. The Pima cotton processing equipment from the gin was dismantled and shipped to Peru, where it will be rebuilt and used to process their cotton, which will in turn be sold to the United States.

He feels that we should be using more of own resources, such as oil, instead of paying to get it from somewhere else. He says that he has been accused of being anti-progress. He likes progress, he says, "if it looks like it will help, but if you aren't making any headway then it is not progress. Just making a change and calling it progress is not my idea of progress."

Harvey is extremely concerned about water issues in the Mesilla Valley. He discusses his views on people moving into New Mexico who want to change it to be the same as where they are from. He feels that people who move to Las Cruces should try to keep it the way it was when they arrived.

TAPE TWO, SIDE B: Blank