

**NEW MEXICO
FARM & RANCH
HERITAGE
MUSEUM**

**ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
INTERVIEW ABSTRACT**

CONSULTANT: Hilario Bernal

DATE OF BIRTH: December 2, 1934 GENDER: Male

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: April 6, 2000

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Bernal residence in Mesquite

INTERVIEWER: Jose Gomez

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM_X_OTHER_____

TRANSCRIBED: Yes: October 31, 2000

NUMBER OF TAPES: Three

ABSTRACTOR: Caroline Palmer

DATE ABSTRACTED: November 2000

QUALITY OF RECORDING (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Early Tortugas and Las Cruces history.

DATE RANGE: 1934 - 2000

ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

TAPE ONE, SIDE A:

Jose Bernal, father of Hilario Bernal, and his brother, Juan Bernal, owned the T-Hook Ranch on the north side of Highway 70 at the Organ Mountains. Previous to 1945, because of the atomic bomb being built, they had to sell the cattle from that area. The cattle were sold in Mexico, and the land was sold.

His mother worked as a nurse at the McBride Hospital then as a chef at the university. Mr. Bernal discussed his grandparent's farms and the regular floods until the reservoir was built.

Mr. Bernal went to Tortugas grade school, Mesilla Park School, and graduated from Las Cruces High School. As he grew up Mr. Bernal worked on the farm with his father, then as a car mechanic in high school. He described the location and men in the Italian POW camp and their work on Transmountain Road. Mr. Bernal's father, Jose, drove the truckloads of Italian POW's to Transmountain Road and stayed there and worked with them all day, then drove them back to camp. When the Italian POW's were moved out, the German Prisoners of War were moved in. The POW's helped build the courthouse.

His father's uncle farmed a little cotton, mostly alfalfa that they baled and sold to the ranchers. Mr. Bernal's uncle, Juan, worked at the University (NMSU) dairy.

His parents lived in a house in Tortugas, but the property was sold after his mother's death. The ruins are still there. His father's family home in Old Mesilla is still there on San Albino St. and the property is now the Snow Ranch. Mr. Bernal learned to drive and got a driver's license at eleven years old to help his father transport the alfalfa harvest.

TAPE ONE, SIDE B:

Mr. Bernal stated that the car was used to carry the load of alfalfa, and the family traveled by horse and buggy.

Mr. Bernal's father, Jose, was very ill as a result of being gassed in World War One and often had to be taken to the Veteran's Hospital in Fort Bayard. Mr. Bernal had to work during his high school years to help support the family.

Not only the Bernal's, but all of the ranchers at the Organ Mountains had to get out because the ground was contaminated.

Mr. Bernal graduated from mechanic school and high school. He was a partner in a garage until his partner went to work at White Sands.

He then moved to Los Angeles, got married in 1954, and returned to Las Cruces because of his father's illness, sold cars for Truman Welch, then moved his wife and two children back to Los Angeles where he entered the police academy. He served as a police officer in Los Angeles for five years, then moved back to Las Cruces and served as a police officer until retirement. After retirement Mr. Bernal worked as a private investigator in El Paso for Jay Arms. After his retirement from Jay Arms, Mr. Bernal founded and ran the local security agency, Ranger Patrol. Although his son, Eric, now runs Ranger Patrol, Mr. Bernal is still a part of it.

Mr. Bernal generally describes the careers of some of his eleven children. Although Mr. Bernal and his first wife are divorced, they are united as parents and everyone gathers for family celebrations.

Mr. Bernal's father, Jose, was gassed in World War One and frequently spent time in the Fort Bayard Veterans Hospital. Mr. Bernal's oldest son, Juan, is preparing a family tree.

TAPE TWO, SIDE A:

Jose Bernal's brand is Diamond 4 *Diamante Cuatro*, but Mr. Bernal no longer has it. His mother's house in Tortugas was looted and the brand, pictures, and family memorabilia were stolen.

Mr. Bernal discussed the changes in the weather. Although in his youth the family had a radio (which he still has), they had no telephone. Mr. Bernal still has some of the harness equipment.

The farm in Tortugas was often referred to as "Rancho del Silo" because of the silo that is still there. At the farm were apple trees and alfalfa.

Mr. Bernal and his uncle both worked at the university dairy, delivering milk in bottles, and learning how to make cheese and cottage cheese. The worst work he did at the university was digging up trees by hand with a shovel.

Mr. Bernal described cutting alfalfa with a horse rig. His father was good with horses, and taught Jose to bronc ride. Mr. Bernal's mother's family had a farm where the Cinema 4 on El Paseo is now located. Because it flooded so often, that was sold and land on Mesquite St. was bought. His mother's family had the *Panderia Guadalupana*. His grandparents on his father's side were horsemen.

Electricity came to their house in Tortugas in the early forties. This home was built of adobe with a wood floor and a well, eventually with a hand pump. His father butchered a hog or a calf and dried the meat because they had no refrigerator, but they did have an icebox. Eventually his father installed an electric pump at the well. His father grew watermelons and cantaloupe in his garden.

His parents had milking sheep and Mr. Bernal was raised on goat milk.

TAPE TWO, SIDE B:

Mr. Bernal described how his father and uncle were experts in windmills, not only fixing their own but also being hired to fix the windmills of others.

As a small boy, Mr. Bernal's father would put him on one of the "dancing" horses to ride in parades. Mr. Bernal admits he was a show-off.

Growing up in Tortugas everybody knew each other. The *Iglesia de Guadalupe* is still there.

Every year on Dec. 12, the day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the town comes alive. People from throughout the United States come to walk "A" Mountain and to watch the Indian dances because

of the miracles. For more than fifty years Mr. Bernal participated in the Indian dances. His mother as a child had participated in the Pueblo dances. Ten of his eleven children danced also. As Tortugas is more Indian, Mesilla is more western. When Billy the Kid was in jail in Mesilla, Mr. Bernal's father talked with him. Downtown Las Cruces had wood sidewalks and was very short. The church and the hotel on Main Street were torn down while he was with the Las Cruces Police Department. A western movie was made about that hotel.

The original name was San Juan de Guadalupe. The name "Tortugas" was a nickname because of the arroyo full of turtles nearby.

In the early years the Rio Grande frequently overflowed its banks. Now it's only streams. People would often drown in that river and the police would have to go in the river looking for the body.

When Mr. Bernal was with the Los Angeles Police Department, he was badly beaten, bones broken, and left for dead. He was in the hospital being prepared for surgery. He knew he had to come and dance on Dec. 12. He lied to the doctor, and came here on crutches and with his brother's help dressed in his costume and went and danced for two days, rested the third day, went back to Los Angeles for the surgery, but the doctors found nothing. *Un milagro*. He was cured. His son, Eric, now dances in the costume and headdress.

Mr. Bernal retired from Las Cruces Police Department in 1993. Even though he is on dialysis now, he is still part of his security business with his son, Eric.

TAPE THREE, SIDE A:

Before the freeways, Tortugas and the University and Las Cruces and Mesilla were all one. Now they are divided.

TAPE THREE, SIDE B: Blank.