

**NEW MEXICO
FARM & RANCH
HERITAGE
MUSEUM**

**ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
INTERVIEW ABSTRACT**

CONSULTANT: Stephen Wilmeth

DATE OF BIRTH: January 9, 1951 GENDER: Male

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: September 8, 2008

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum

INTERVIEWER: Donna M. Wojcik

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM X OTHER ___

TRANSCRIBED: No

NUMBER OF TAPES: Three

ABTRACTOR: Donna M. Wojcik

DATE ABSTRACTED: October 1, 2008

RECORDING QUALITY (SPECIFY): Good. Initial start is faint.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Peter M. Shelley (Wilmeth's grandfather) legacy and ranching in the Cliff, N.M. area.

DATE RANGE: 1880-2008

ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

TAPE ONE, SIDE A:

The interview begins with family history of both maternal and paternal grandparents and their arrival in the Cliff, N.M. area. The emphasis is on the Peter M. Shelley family. Shelley first arrived in New Mexico in 1883 after his brother invited him to come out to see the Gila area. Shelley returned to Tennessee and brought back his family and eighty head of cattle in the spring of 1884. The trip was a difficult one, with lack of adequate water for most of the trip. They traveled from El Paso to Deming by train, where they off-loaded and headed north to the Gila.

Just north of Deming, Shelley was stopped by cattlemen who informed them that they were not going to be permitted to go any further because the cattlemen were afraid that Shelley's cattle carried Texas fever. The family was held there for three days, after which Shelley told the cattlemen that he had nowhere to go home to and was going north regardless of what they wanted. He pushed past the cattlemen and arrived on the banks of Mogollon Creek, where he established headquarters for the 916 Ranch, which still exists today. Additional information on the 916 Ranch is given. Shelley eventually opened a mercantile store to meet the needs of community settlers and his own family. He extended credit to help the community.

Shelley's relationship with other ranchers is discussed. The original homestead consisted of a quarter-section or one hundred sixty acres. The establishment of the Gila Forest Reserve in 1899 and the National Forest in 1904 and subsequent involvement between government land agents was not without conflict. Allotments and fence administrative boundary issues began to surface. The Taylor Grazing Act did not cover Forest Service lands. During the Great Depression, hundreds of cattle were sold into kill programs. The cattle were slaughtered and the ranchers paid as little as sixteen dollars a head. In 1944 the Forest Service notified Shelley that all the land north of the High Divide would be eliminated from his allotment, which eventually led to the demise of Shelley's cattle operation.

Wilmeth's maternal great-grandfather, Lee Rice, married Shelley's daughter. After leaving Illinois, Rice worked in a Texas partnership with Captain Richard King and Charles Goodnight. When the financial market began to collapse King, who owed money to Rice, told him to cut out some cattle and leave the area before the collapse hit. Rice did so and headed west with another cowboy. They arrived at Chloride Flat, N.M., and held the cattle there. There is speculation that the cowboy Rice traveled with was "black" because when he and Rice went to town for a haircut, the barber closed the front of the shop and let them in the back door. This cowboy apparently became a trusted advisor and friend to Charles Goodnight and would often carry the money when they traveled because no one would ever think that a black man would have any money.

Rice homesteaded at the head of Sacaton Creek. He was known as a good businessman, donating the original land where the Cliff schools now sit. He personally spent a year of his time and the expense to secure the first schoolteacher for the school.

TAPE ONE, SIDE B:

Wilmeth's grandparents were married in 1916 and lived in the Mogollon area during the 1918 flu epidemic. Wilmeth tells of problems with native Indians and the tensions this caused.

At the peak of operations, Shelley had an area the size of seven-and-a-half townships under his administrative control. Typically ranchers would begin with the initial homestead of ¼ acre, seek additional water sources, and collect the ownership of those water sources in addition to purchasing abandoned homesteads. His principle livestock was probably a Texas Longhorn type that he brought with him from Texas. He began raising Hereford cattle because they could be bred to suit the country.

Shelley died in 1935 and did not live to see the introduction of the black breeds of cattle, which eliminated the pink eye problems and large calves associated with the Hereford. Water for local ranchers came from several different sources -- free flowing water such as rivers and creeks, seeps and springs, and wells. Wells were limited to the homestead headquarter locations and other settlement areas because it was difficult to get water rigs into the Gila. These water sources were generally reliable.

There have always been cycles of drought, wet weather, and the amount of snowfall depended on the weather cycles. Today global warming contributes to the impact weather has on ranching and farming. Wilmeth recalls that the storms of 1925 and 1967 had an impact, but states that New Mexico has fairly temperate weather.

Shelley initially built a cabin on his homestead. A three-room house was built next to the cabin by 1900. Another house was located on the river in Bell Canyon. No fences existed on the homestead at the time he acquired the land. By 1918 the Forest Service permitted fencing on its allotments. By 1930 there was a lot of barbed-wire fencing.

The Rice ranch at Sacaton Creek did not have electricity until fifteen years ago. They used butane as their fuel source.

Shelley's 916 brand is believed to have been brought by Shelley from Texas. Wilmeth's grandfather inherited the Cross Triangle brand from the Lee Rice estate; however, grandfather lost it in a poker game to his brother. In later years it was re-acquired and gifted to Wilmeth and his wife when they acquired their Butterfield Trail ranch.

The historical round of work is discussed. In New Mexico, the year is generally built around a fall market program, which means a spring calving period. Wilmeth explains that bulls are run with cattle year-round. Calving starts in January and peaks in late March. Calves are processed and turned out in June, corresponding with the end of the school year when children are available to assist. Vaccinations are briefly discussed. Wilmeth recalls a severe screwworm problem.

TAPE TWO, SIDE A:

The screwworm eradication program began in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and Wilmeth explains how calves are treated for this.

Springtime in New Mexico can be brutal. Protein supplements such as cottonseed cake are generally needed at this time of year. Summer months are spent riding fence and fixing water gaps. Wilmeth states that in the past ranchers spent more time with the cattle, moving the cattle and knowing the country the cattle were on. Today ranchers do not have that luxury because they do not have the labor. While expenses are greater now than in past years, ranchers have the advantage of scientific tools and breakthroughs.

In the fall, from September to November, calves are weaned and shipped. Many ranchers follow the VAC45 program, which calls for forty-five days of weaning. Prior to the 1950s, the calves were driven (a two-day trip) to Silver City where they were loaded on the train and shipped from the railyard located south of town. Today calves are trucked directly from the ranch to market. The cattle herds are also culled in the fall months. Pregnancy testing was not done in early years. Ranchers tested "by eye." Wilmeth quotes rancher Jupe Means, who said, "If a cowman couldn't read his cattle, he didn't need to be in the business." The rancher generally retained bulls; today the preferred method is to purchase bulls from outside.

The nearest market center depended on where the buyer was. Lee Rice shipped to Illinois for years. Often the calves were fattened up at a feedlot before reaching the stockyards where they were sold. Wilmeth does not recall any day-work cowboys on the ranch when he was growing up. Friends and family were called upon to help when needed, unpaid of course.

The coming of the railroad impacted mass migration. By 1880 families had traded travel by covered wagon for train travel. The railroad became the source of transportation for cattle until the 1940s. When asked if he recalls any notable booms or busts, Wilmeth responded by saying that this was not something that a child would have known. His experience with busts was in 1973 when the price of cattle fell from one dollar a head to thirty-nine cents.

Wilmeth does not recall any of his grandparents doing any banking other than perhaps to obtain a mortgage on a ranch purchase. He does not recall any line of credit being extended to either side of the family. He recalls his father borrowing money from another rancher for the mortgage of a house. The community of Cliff, N.M. is described. It is said to have been a tough community for newcomers to get into because it was biased and highly discriminatory. If a person "showed moxie and the power to persevere then that person would be respected." Wilmeth refers to the respect for the "black" cowboy based on his skills as a cowboy and his loyalty as a friend.

Wilmeth talks about federal government programs, such as the Taylor Grazing Act and the Soil Conservation Service, and their impact on the Shelley operation. Wilmeth states that there is still a reluctance and hesitancy to work with federal programs. While he is grateful for their assistance with financing, he fears a relationship with any government land agency. There is a discussion regarding various government programs, their interpretation of their bounds, and their authority to manage those areas.

TAPE TWO, SIDE B:

Shelley was not protected by federal actions through the Taylor Grazing Act, which increased the production demands while at the same time incurring debt. The result was that he had to liquidate everything he had through kill programs or through range delivery contracts to satisfy the debts. He was unable to maintain improvements on the land so his allotment was eliminated. Shelley was left with no credit and no cattle and had been "backed into a corner."

Typical items purchased at the mercantile and what the types of food the family ate is discussed. The rancher or farmer generally did equipment repairs. Lee Rice had his own blacksmith shop, but those without access to that would take their items to the blacksmith or machinist in Silver City or Deming.

Children were expected to do chores, often collecting eggs, helping in the milk barn, or killing chickens. "You were either helpful or you were in the way." Special holidays celebrated by his family included Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Easter. Wilmeth recalls that his paternal grandmother was emphatic about the family being together. It was not a choice - - it was a demand. The family has never gathered again since her death, he says.

He describes the maternal influences as the thrust that held the family together. Meals, general manners, and the morning routine are discussed.

TAPE THREE, SIDE A:

A typical breakfast meal in the Wilmeth and Rice families is discussed. Dinner was the noon meal and was generally a hearty meal of meat, potatoes, lots of vegetables, and "always dessert." Snacking between meals was unheard of. Leisure activities as a child were mostly outdoor activities. Little time was spent inside the house. Sports were generally limited to school activities. Wilmeth describes how he met his wife.

Relationships with neighboring ranchers are discussed. There was not a lot of interaction with them, but they knew their boundaries and knew about their families. Some work was swapped between neighbors, but most of the time it was immediate family members or relatives that supplied the extra labor.

Wilmeth attended both elementary and high school in Silver City. He received a bachelor's degree in biology from Western New Mexico University and a graduate's degree in agricultural economics from

New Mexico State University. While his parents were supportive of higher education, he does not recall his parents voicing an opinion on it or insisting that he attend college.

Membership in farming or ranching associations such as the Cattleman's Association is discussed. In his grandparents' time, the Farm Bureau was *the* association, and Wilmeth believes that his maternal grandparents joined for social reasons more than any thing else. His paternal grandparents did not belong to any associations.

Wilmeth describes his fondest recollections of growing up on the ranch and states that he was always happiest being outside with the dirt and the livestock. He has fond memories of hunting and branding. He feels that the quality of life was better then as compared to now. It was more simplistic and people were more engaged in hard work, which was expected. There was no alternative.

When asked what he feels the future holds for ranching, he states that he is pessimistic. Ranching is not easy, it is an unbelievable obstacle to overcome to go into ranching, and the pressures of taxes and inheritance issues complicate the matter. He feels that our ability to produce food and fiber has reached a critical stage.

The stewardship of ranch lands is discussed. He discusses his involvement with the People For Preserving Our Western Heritage (PFPOWH) organization which has conceptualized an idea to preserve federal lands and offer federal land designations that are long term and protected as wilderness yet with opportunities to maintain the social fabric and heritage on those lands. Wilmeth feels that the association with man and these lands needs to be recognized. Local, federal, and state support for the organization is discussed.

TAPE THREE, SIDE B:

Wilmeth believes that we need "to do the best we can given the resources and time and the obstacles we face in our lifetime, then hand it off to the next generation and let them make the way for the generations beyond them." He feels that we need to recognize the contribution that cattle have made to the west, and stop minimizing and demeaning their existence. He believes that the government is not the ranchers' or farmers' friend.

The interview concludes with a listing of interview referrals.