

**NEW MEXICO
FARM & RANCH
HERITAGE
MUSEUM**

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW ABSTRACT

CONSULTANT: James Morris

DATE OF BIRTH: 1940s GENDER: Male

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: June 10, 2009

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Consultant's home in Caballo, NM

INTERVIEWER: Holly Radke

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMFRHM

TRANSCRIBED: August 11, 2009

NUMBER OF TAPES: Four

ABTRACTOR: Donna M. Wojcik

DATE ABSTRACTED: June 16, 2009

RECORDING QUALITY (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Saddle making in New Mexico from the 1960s to 2009

DATE RANGE: 1940s - 2009

ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

TAPE ONE, SIDE A:

The interview begins with an introduction of those present during the interview, as well as information about the consultant's family. Morris discusses that he became interested in saddle making as a child and often skipped school to "hang out" at the local saddle shop. His father had a difficult time finding a comfortable saddle to cushion a tail bone injury, and Morris believes that this is what sparked his interest in saddles.

Morris made his own saddle trees for several years, but says it was too much work. He prefers saddle trees made of wood rather than the newer fiberglass saddle trees because wooden trees will give a little before they break. Fiberglass saddle trees crack around the screws, often break around the horn, and eventually create pressure spots for the horse. Mexican pine is much heavier than the pine found in the United States and is also cheaper. As a result, a lot of wood is being imported from Mexico for saddle trees. There is a saddle tree manufacturer in Canutillo, Tex., that Morris believes still makes the best saddle trees.

Good quality leather is available, but it is very expensive. Tanneries in the United States do not produce the same quality of leather that was once produced in this country because they are not able to use the same chemicals in the tanning process that were used in the past. Morris states that a lot of tanneries have moved to Mexico because they can still use the chemicals down there. Leather that is too soft breaks down quickly, and un-tanned leather creases easily.

Morris made his first saddle when he was eighteen years old. He apprenticed under Harlan Webb; and recounts about getting fired because he had accidentally taken one of Webb's tools home to practice with. After the incident Morris purchased his own supplies. He moved to Denver but was unable to get a job in a saddle shop because he did not have enough experience and was virtually unknown. Webb contacted him several months later to ask him to return to El Paso to work with him. Webb had taken over S. D. Myres saddle shop and needed the extra help. Morris returned to El Paso and worked for Webb for three years before leaving to work at the Bluemel Saddle and Harness Shop. Morris says that he was trained well at Bluemels. Each saddle maker has his own techniques and ways of doing things, so when Morris struck out on his own he had to decide what was the best way for him to accomplish what he wanted when making a saddle.

TAPE ONE, SIDE B: Blank

TAPE TWO, SIDE A:

Morris tells a story of sewing up the bottom edge of a co-worker's work pant legs as a joke.

Morris discusses saddle styles and says that saddle styles vary from one area to another. If someone found a saddle that they liked, they would spread the word. Other people would hear about it and try the saddle. Word would spread that that type of saddle was good.

Harlan Webb's saddle shop business was mostly local, although he did put out a catalog in order to draw business from other areas. Morris recalls one saddle order from a customer on 5th Avenue in New York City. Webb named the saddle "The 5th Avenue".

Morris had worked at S. D. Myres' shop in the early 1960s and recalls that they made chaps, wrist collars, saddle bags, and many other items. He remembers they also made custom pistol holsters. When Morris worked for Bluemel, a total of six years, he made just about every saddle that went out of the shop. He has made saddles for several El Paso area ranchers. He tells the story about a saddle order that he had taken when he was in business for himself. The order was for a saddle to be completed for Christmas. When the customer called to inquire about the order, Morris realized he had forgotten about it. Since he had been paid, he knew that he needed to make the saddle. With the help of his two children doing the sewing and his wife doing the oiling and drying, he was able to complete the saddle and have it on the way to its destination in time. He had started the saddle one morning and completed it by 1:30 a.m. the following morning. Morris says that you can make a saddle in about a week if you have no interruptions.

Fellow saddle maker Johnny Bean is discussed. Bean often visited the shop where Morris worked and noticed that Morris kept a canteen on his bench. Morris did not want to take water breaks away from his bench when he was on company time. Bluemel told Bean that Morris also took his knives home to sharpen instead of doing it when he was working. Bean and Morris became friends and often traveled together. Bean was a saddle maker who had learned to make saddles in Wyoming and had worked for S. D. Myres. Bean sent his saddles out to be tooled.

Morris recalls that while he was working at Bluemels he made repairs on some saddles that Slim Green had made. He recalls that Green made free-swinging stirrups. He liked Slim's work, and contacted him to get information on the stirrups. Slim sent him the pattern, which Morris still has today.

When asked how a person goes about ordering a saddle, he says that most cowboys had an idea of what they want. They would come into the shop, and describe in detail what they wanted. Bluemel often took measurements and passed them on to Morris, who then made the saddle. Most saddles, says Morris, were made to fit a typical quarter horse. Different breeds of horses have different body types. Saddle trees were ordered according to measurements. Silver and other metal parts were ordered from different companies that specialized on particular parts.

TAPE TWO, SIDE B: Blank

TAPE THREE, SIDE A:

The tape begins mid-discussion about a saddle order. Morris recalls that two saddles were made for Jim and Margie Walker. Jim wanted a saddle with a high cantle and forward stirrups. Margie wanted a really pretty saddle. Morris recalls that he decorated her saddle with 250 hearts, all in different sizes.

Saddle patterns have changed over the years and have become more intricate. Morris believes that the market has dictated these changes. Large flowers were popular when Slim Green was making saddles, but now flower styles are more complex. Morris says that he tried a few apprentices, but most of them did not work out.

Morris has been in the saddle business for about fifty years. He quit Bluemels to open his own shop because "Bluemel didn't pay me enough." He had five employees in his shop. His business did well because people already knew him from working at Myres and Bluemels. Morris says that Bluemel would not do business with just anyone. If he did not want to do business with someone, he would send them to Morris' shop. Morris recalls that there was cooperation between most of the shops. If a shop got a "hot check" they would pass the information on to the other shops.

Morris' children worked with him in the shop, but he says that he burned them out. The children would do the buck stitching on the saddles. At the peak of business he was making approximately 750

handmade belts and sixty saddles per year. He does not know what will happen to his saddle business in the future because his children are not interested in making saddles. Today he makes between two and six saddles a year. He feels that being in a rural area has not hindered business because he has a good reputation and is well known. He does not advertise — relies on his reputation.

There is a discussion about several other saddle makers. Morris often used a Porter catalog as a reference for some of the designs on his saddles because Porter made good saddles. He tells a story about the Johnson saddle. Johnson had brought an old saddle tree and asked Morris to build a saddle that matched the original saddle. When asked if it is difficult to make a saddle to fit an old tree he says that having a picture helps a lot.

Morris states that people order custom saddles instead of buying the cheaper saddles because they are made of better trees and are better built. The customer can get the cantle height and swell width that they want, as well as customize the horn for whatever they are going to be doing with the saddle. “Real cowboys don’t buy those real cheap saddles,” he says. Morris says that it is hard to work on cheap saddles because they do not hold together. “They’re dangerous” for both the horse and the rider, states Morris. Many saddle makers take casts of a variety of horse breeds to use as a reference for fitting the tree to the horse’s back. Morris took a cast off a Dartmoor pony and used that cast to set his trees on. This would show where the tree was hitting. Most of his saddles had double rigging.

TAPE THREE, SIDE B: Blank

TAPE FOUR, SIDE A:

Morris believes that living on the ranch where his father worked was one of his best memories of growing up. The greatest hardship was getting up and going off to work when it was still dark. “In those days I didn’t know it was hardship. I thought that’s the way it’s supposed to be.” He had a trap line to catch coyotes and large cats. He used “green” broncs to run the trap line and says that by the time he was done running the trap line for the season those broncs had been broken. The broncs got accustomed to loud noises, sudden moves, and carrying the heavy trap lines. Morris gave the hides to a neighbor but did not receive money for anything he gave away. In the end the neighbor gave him a horse “as payment for all the hides.”

Morris started his business from scratch and made his own tools. The first leather piece he ever made was a purse for his mother. The first five saddles he made were made at the ranch bunkhouse, and cowboys who worked on the ranch did all the hand sewing for him. Many saddle makers still make their own tools, but you can buy Korean-made leather tools at little cost. Good tools are expensive, he says, and he has already decided what he is going to do with his tools when he is finished making saddles.

The interview ends with a discussion about tradeshow he has attended, as well as association saddles [saddles for rodeo bronc riders] that he has made.

TAPE FOUR, SIDE B: Blank