

**NEW MEXICO
FARM & RANCH
HERITAGE
MUSEUM**

**ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
INTERVIEW ABSTRACT**

CONSULTANT: Gene Simon

DATE OF BIRTH: March 15, 1916 GENDER: Male

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: April 21, 2011

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Simon home in Faywood, N.M.

INTERVIEWER: Donna M. Wojcik

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM

TRANSCRIBED: No

NUMBER OF TAPES: Three

ABTRACTOR: Donna M. Wojcik

DATE ABSTRACTED: April 30, 2011

RECORDING QUALITY (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Simon describes his late start as a rancher, the uniqueness of his current ranch location, his years as a newspaper publisher and editor, and his eight years serving on the Farm & Ranch Heritage Museum Board of Directors.

DATE RANGE: 1916-2011

ABSTRACT (Important Topics in Order of Appearance):

TAPE ONE, SIDE A:

Simon originally came to New Mexico after the end of World War II, and returned to New Mexico from Pennsylvania in 1973. At that time he was the president and publisher of the Valley Daily News in Tarentum, Penn. Simon sold the newspaper to the Gannett Publishers, who also owned the Ponderosa Highlands Ranch north of Silver City, N.M. Gannett did not want the ranch, so Simon took the ranch in exchange for his minority share of the newspaper. The ranch consisted of 67,000 acres of land on a Forest Service grazing permit. Simon sold the Ponderosa in the mid-1980s and bought three sections of land on Lone Mountain, west of Silver City. He eventually sold this land and purchased 81 acres of land at his current location – Rancho del Rio – near Faywood, N.M. Through the purchase of additional land, he increased the size of the ranch to 7,600 acres, but today he has decreased to approximately 1,000 acres.

Simon states that his ranch is larger than about half the ranches in the area, but with the Sacaton grasslands he is able to hold as much cattle as he did on the 7,600 acres if he uses winter grazing permits. He released ten acres of his land, the location of an Indian ruin, to the New Mexico Archaeological Conservancy. Simon raises Brangus and Angus cattle and says that he prefers to raise Brangus because they never leave their calves unattended. Rancho del Rio has a diverse landscape with High Chihuahua desert, Sacaton grassland, mountain elevations of 6,400 feet, a riparian area of three miles, and wooded areas of cottonwood and velvet ash. This diverse landscape supports a variety of wildlife including mule deer, turkey, javelina, raptors, and great horned owls. As a result, wildlife has the option to change environments.

TAPE ONE, SIDE B:

Rancho del Rio has three water wells, an irrigation well, and a well for the house and outbuildings. Most ranchers in the area get water from historic Spanish ditches which specify a day and time to utilize the water. Simon states that he has always had water, although at times the volume or flow of water is less during dry spells. Weather has a definite effect on his ranching operation, and he says that if there is no water then there is no feed. He has not seen any sizeable losses due to weather but has had cattle struck by lightning twice.

All of the fences on the ranch are barbed wire. Simon raises the lowest of the four strands higher than usual so that wildlife can get back and forth, so as not to interfere with their natural migration routes. He describes the ranch brand, a typical round of work, and the ranch hands he has used over the years. “Abnormal is normal and normal is abnormal,” he says. The same rule applies to both ranching and “newspapering.” Cattle prices over the years and the closure of the Deming Livestock Auction are briefly discussed.

TAPE TWO, SIDE A:

Simon describes the most effective way to handle cattle is to “ease them along.” He has never had any problems with predators and says that when ranchers kill or trap coyotes they create a vacuum that more move into. He prefers to leave them be but says that he has had some losses due to man. During the mine strikes in the Silver City area hungry miners would kill a cow and

take the best cuts of meat for food. Often hunters mistake black cattle for black bears and accidentally shoot them. He does not permit hunting on the Rancho del Rio because hunters break his fences, leave the gates open, and leave their beer cans and litter behind. Simon recalls only one time when he had serious problems with locoweed and other toxic vegetation, and that was after some strange winter rains. He has never had any problems with either the Forest Service or the Bureau of Land Management and has never gotten involved in any federal or state payment programs. "If you can't hack it yourself, you shouldn't be there," he says.

In addition to cattle Simon raises peacocks, African guineas, and Araucana chickens. He describes a typical day from morning to evening chores. As he gets older he says he gets out later in the morning. "There are few days that go as planned." A rancher must be adaptable, must be able to shift gears really fast, and must get his priorities right. He has only occasional sighting of wolves or mountain lions and has never had a problem. He is not against the introduction of the Mexican Grey Wolf, and says that there should never be cattle run in remote back country areas where wolves exist.

He recalls a day in February 1957 when his newspaper caught fire and still gets emotional when talking about how the employees "kicked in" \$21,000 to rebuild. He remembers with pride the employee loyalty and family attitude at the paper.

TAPE TWO, SIDE B:

Simon believes that "when you mess up nature you do more harm than good." Wolves control the sick, lame, aged, and diseased animals, and cull the weak. It is "nature doing its job," he says. He discusses his childhood memories in Iowa and Ohio and how he got started in the newspaper business.

Simon remembers his mother making homemade soap and root beer. It was his job to stack the bars of soap and to put the caps on the root beer. One day out of the week was always homemade soup day. Minor illnesses were treated at home by his mother or by the doctor who made house calls. He recalls that squab [young pigeons that have not left the nest] was traditionally fed to people who were sick because the meat is easy to digest.

A typical breakfast when he was growing up was oatmeal, but he says that he still likes a good bacon and egg breakfast occasionally. He recalls listening to Lowell Thomas and the Amos and Andy show on the radio in the 1930s.

TAPE THREE, SIDE A:

Simon describes his best memory of growing up as the time when his dad allowed him to shoot a shotgun out the window at midnight on New Years Eve; although the blast sent him flying backwards, it was fun. He recalls his greatest hardship as having to leave his friends in Iowa when he moved to Ohio. He laughs when he remembers when his uncle hooked him up to pull a plow and says that they always had a good garden.

During his college days he worked as a stringer for the Cleveland Plain Dealer newspaper. He wrote the News of Ohio Colleges and Campuses column and also covered college sports for the Berea News. He was able to pay for his college tuition and expenses with no debts. In 1949 he took over as president and publisher of the Valley Daily News after the death of his father-in-

law, Charlie Howe. He continued in this capacity until 1976 when the paper was sold to Gannett Publishing.

During the 1960s the mafia was in control of much of Westmoreland County in Pennsylvania. Simon wrote a letter to then-Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy to see if something could be done. Within a few weeks there were federal agents in Westmoreland County and New Kensington. Simon says he was approached by the mafia to “lay off” in exchange for money, which he refused.

TAPE THREE, SIDE B:

Simon compares the way he ran the Valley Daily News with the way that Gannett did after they purchased it. He describes his way as “product quality equals readership and circulation. Readership and circulation equals advertising, and advertising equals money.”

What does he believe the future holds for ranching? Simon feels that the “little guys will go to the wall.” Increased drought conditions will not be good for ranchers.

After serving eight years on the Farm & Ranch Museum Board of Directors, he thinks that the facility has a lot of potential and room for expansion. The Museum needs to “widen the periphery of awareness and the significance of our mission.” He believes it is important for the facility to articulate the specifics of why all this is important, “the why and wherefore of what we are about,” and what all this means in a changing society and world we live in now.