

**Oral History Interview of
Houston McKenzie**

**Interviewed by: Andy Wilkinson
January 12, 2016
Fort Stockton, Texas**

**Part of the:
*Fort Stockton Interviews***

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Transcript Overview:

This interview features Houston McKenzie of Fort Stockton, Texas. McKenzie discusses his family history, growing up in Tucumcari, New Mexico, and moving to the Fort Stockton area.

Length of Interview: 01:11:26

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Keywords

Fort Stockton, Texas, livestock, ranching, Tucumcari, New Mexico

Andy Wilkinson (AW):

Are you—have you been explained what we're doing?

Houston McKenzie (HM):

Not exactly, said you were doing some kind of oral history.

AW:

Yeah, well, let me just start by kind of telling you what that is. Both for Texas Tech, where I work—the archive at the University, and also here at the Historical Association in Fort Stockton, we've been for some years now trying to collect as many oral history interviews as we can, and what an oral history interview is, is exactly what it sounds like. Somebody sits down and talks about their life and about their history—what they do, what they've done, what they—you know, the place where they come from. That sort of thing. The object of it being that in the future, maybe even a hundred, two hundred years from now, somebody can still come to the archive and hear Houston McKenzie talk about himself and about Fort Stockton and his place. So, it is history that is not interpreted by somebody or altered by somebody or reported by somebody. It's actually, it's what we call first source.

HM:

May not be the truth, but mostly the truth.

AW:

Well, it will at least be yours.

HM:

With some stretchers like Mark Twain says. He talked mostly the truth, but some stretchers.

Yeah, at least that's my story. [laughter]

AW:

The stretchers are sometimes the most interesting part of it, but again, the idea is at least if they're stretchers, they are your stretchers and not somebody else's [laughter]. One of the things that I'll ask you to do when we get done is to sign a release for our archive, so that we can let those people in the future listen to your interview.

HM:

That's fine.

AW:

Okay, good. Let's get started at the beginning, then, just with something real simple like your date of birth and where you were born.

HM:

I was born July 20, 1946, in El Paso.

AW:

In El Paso. Did you grow up there?

HM:

No, I grew up in Tucumcari, New Mexico.

AW:

In Tucumcari? Really? When did you move to Tucumcari?

HM:

We own a ranch between Santa Rosa and Clines Corners, New Mexico. I guess, my first four years, I lived there and then we—my dad bought a farm at Tucumcari, it was a new irrigation project over there and lived there about three years and then we moved into town, and I was raised in town there.

AW:

In Tucumcari? Did you graduate from high school?

HM:

Graduated 1964. Better than before, the class of '64. [laughter]

AW:

I was class of '66, but we didn't have any funny to say about that. [laughter]

HM:

You're class of '66? You're going to have a fiftieth this year.

AW:

I know it, and somebody said, "Are you going to go?" and I said, "I don't know if I want to be hanging out with all those old people." [laughter] They're going to look just like me.

HM:

Yeah, you look at people's name tag and they look kind of familiar, and you have to look a while to remember them, and it kind of hurts their feelings and when they do that for you, I said, "Well, I did the same, man. What's the matter? Don't you recognize me?"

AW:

Yeah, I know. I look the same when I look in the mirror, but I'm sure I don't to anybody else. McKenzie, now, is that the same McKenzie as the McKenzies from McKenzie Road?

HM:

Yeah, same family. My granddad, they had had several brothers. My granddad, I think was kind of the older brother or one of the older brothers.

AW:

What's your granddad's name?

HM:

His name was Eugene Waller McKenzie. E. W. McKenzie, they called him EW and he was—he had big ideas. He wanted to be a big operator at, I guess, his [inaudible] in San Marcos and his dad had a farm and a store. I think my granddad was born in like 1858 or something, a long time ago. He was married before he married my grandmother and my grandmother was like thirty years younger than he was. My granddad lost his first wife and her baby in childbirth, I think, the way I understand it. Then, he met my grandmother and they got married—I don't know, 1906 or something. My granddad ranched and partnered with all his brothers or several of his brothers, and they had a big ranch leased at Big Lake. It was university land and we got some records of that, but he got behind on his payments and they were writing letters to Dunham for money to get him to pay his lease after a couple of years [laughter] and he turned loose of that lease. Anyway, they had a—he and his brother, they call him General, but his name was Waller. I think they had a ranch up at—close south of Hobbs Monument and I read some history on that. That was a big old ranch, and I think he was always pretty far extended financially. They kept that ranch three or four years. I think he came here in about nineteen—I mean eighteen—the late 1880s anyway, somewhere like that, here to Fort Stockton, and they had a pretty big operation here. He and his brother, Tom, and Waller and—had another brother named Jim. Jim was a—they helped send Jim through law school at Vanderbilt and he got to be a lawyer and they set him up ranching, but he didn't like ranching very good. He wasn't good at that, and he later became County Judge here at Fort Stockton, and later, got appointed to be on a court of appeals in El Paso. He was over there. My granddad and brothers went out to Arizona and had a ranch at San Simone. They had a ranch at San Simon and they, and my granddad and Uncle Tom, his brother Tom, bought a ranch in Fort Sumner, New Mexico, and it was a big place and went nearly all the way down the river towards Roswell. Anyway, in about 1920, after the war, after the First World War, they made a lot of money and they were big operators. My granddad bought him a big house in El Paso and got him an office downtown.

AW:

[laughter]

HM:

They just about went broke. The price of cattle—he had a whole bunch as you can see in his old tally book. You know, several, like thousands of two-year old steers and yearling steers and he got offered—he wanted a hundred dollars a head for them back then and they offered him \$92, and he said he wasn't going to give them away for \$92 and loaded them on a train car and sent them out to Kansas for summer grazing. He ended up selling them for thirty dollars or something.

AW:

Plus paying for the train.

HM:

He was financed with a Drum Commission Company. It was a sales commission when you—back then you would sell cattle and you would load them onto train cars and send them to Fort Worth stockyards. Somebody would sell the cattle for you and it was Drum Commission, but they would also finance you. My dad kept all those letters that the Drum Commission Company had written. My granddad told him that he was way behind and that he was going to have to do something. My granddad almost—he'd never declared bankruptcy, but he had sold—he took over part of the debt and Uncle Tom took over part of the debt, and they sold most all the land here—they have here in Fort Pecos County, except for two sections. We live on those two sections right now and we kept the university lease. It wasn't worth much back then. They sold a place in Arizona. Anyway, we ended up just with this place here, a university lease. They had some hard times then because agriculture was in bad trouble.

AW:

And this is after the First World War?

HM:

Before the Depression, after the First World War. My grandmother, she came from Virginia. Her dad was a farmer over there and a cattle trader and a sheep trader.

AW:

How'd she wind up out here?

HM:

Oh, that's a story too. She was raised close to Galax, Virginia, and she got out of school, and she applied to get a teaching job there at the little school, the local school. A neighbor girl applied for the same job and they gave it to my grandmother. It's kind of funny because about twenty years ago, my dad and my brother and I, we went back to Galax, Virginia and talking to some cousins, and they said, "Well, you need to meet Hurley Hampton. He's a hundred years old and he's in a

nursing home. He remembers a lot of stuff. His brain works good.” We went and met Hurley and I asked him if he remembered my grandmother, Laro. He said, “Oh, yeah. She was my first grade teacher. We love Laro.”

AW:

[laughter] How do you spell that name, Laro?

HM:

L-a-r-o.

AW:

L-a-r-o.

HM:

He said, “She had to leave halfway through school because there was some trouble there between her dad and the neighbor over whose daughter got the job and she thought there was going to be a killing over the deal.”

AW:

Wow.

HM:

So, she came out to West Texas and she got a job teaching in Mobeetie, Texas, I think, to start with. Anyway, and then, she had a cousin down at Pecos, that was married to a rancher at Pecos. She went down to visit them. She was helping them pull a windmill and one of the neighbors came up and killed, I don't know—the cousin's husband, and she witnessed that and anyway, in some way, she got to going with my granddad and my granddad married her. They had a good marriage, had three kids, my uncle and my aunt and my dad. My granddad died in '32, I think, 1932. When he died, I was going to tell you, during the twenties, they were having a lot of financial trouble. They had this big house and my grandmother wanted to hold onto that house. She took in boarders.

AW:

This was the house in El Paso?

HM:

Yeah. So, they kind of converted that to an apartment house and they had two or three boarders. She learned how to do china painting and so she got the ladies that still had money and everything back then—she'd teach the ladies how to paint china. The other thing she did that has

really turned out to be rewarding is some of those artists from Taos, I don't know if you know Sharpe, Joseph Sharp and this guy named Fremont Ellis. He was a Santa Fe painter. Well they would—she got hooked up with them somehow because she'd go to—she was a real smart lady. She would ride the train down to New Orleans and buy antiques. That's the other thing she did, sold antiques. She'd always keep a little of the best stuff for her and she'd sell antiques to everybody so she kind of went into business. She'd get Joseph Sharp, and they'd come down and bring a bunch of their paintings and she did kind of like a Tupperware party with Joseph Sharp. [laughter]

AW:
That's cool.

HM:
They sold a lot of paintings, but she also kept—she'd get a little money ahead and she'd buy some of those paintings and some of those paintings got worth a lot of money.

AW:
Oh yeah.

HM:
Anyway, at that same time, my granddad died, and my dad was just a freshman in college there going to school at Mines—College of Mines—mines, minerals and fine arts or something in El Paso, Texas Western or now it's—

AW:
UTEP.

HM:
UTEP. He had a little sister and an older brother, but the older brother suffered from—he was spastic from the injury at birth, and he was a good guy, but he didn't like to work and wasn't interested in doing anything. Actually, he was an interesting guy, but a pretty worthless guy. [laughter] My dad had his disabilities taken away so he could help them run their business. They had cattle. They kept what they called remnants, you know. The commission company wanted them to pay off their debt, well, they couldn't quite pay it off, but they did the best they could, sold everything and owed them. They just said, well, the remnants is like when you go guide [?] that pasture and you can't get them all, you've got a wild one over here and one that—I was always a little skeptical about how many. They got back in the business pretty good, pretty quick.

AW:

All the remnants.

HM:

There was more remnants left. [laughter]

AW:

I guess it would depend on how—

HM:

How good of cowboys you got. [laughter]

AW:

Yeah, or how good you intended to be when you gathered them [laughter]

HM:

Anyway.

AW:

Just to stop for a second, they were still living in El Paso, but had these two sections out here in the University Leagues, right?

HM:

Yeah. In fact, my dad's—that's another story—he had a brother, Tom McKenzie, that had a ranch there at Bakersfield. They never partnered much together, but Tom had a son named Cleo [nose blowing] and Cleo had been first cousin to my dad and Cleo was married to—who's his wife? I can't think of her right now, but anyway, Cleo had seven kids, and Cleo he was working for my—he was partnering with my granddad too. He was taking care of this ranch part of the time, anyway. Cleo was married, had seven kids. Virginia? Virginia? I can't remember his mom's name, but I should because all of his kids—Cleo raised all those kids right here in Pecos County. My granddad died, and my dad ended up going to Texas A&M to go to college. My grandmother and Cleo got married after my granddad died. Cleo divorced his wife with seven kids and Cleo was my granddad's nephew. My grandmother married her husband's nephew and he'd left his wife and seven kids, and that was right here so, for years, my grandmother was mud, you know, because everybody here in Fort Stockton, they were sympathetic and figured my grandmother stole Cleo away from his wife, and so there was a schism in our family for a long time. Like you were talking about, the McKenzie turnoff, well, that really goes back to Cleo's kids. So, Cleo's—I guess, it was his second oldest son, Bill Ed, was a really good rancher and a

good guy and he—the split the—well, anyway, they—after Cleo left his wife, well then, his kids had some country, quite a bit of country, ranch country and so they were ranching there.

AW:

Was that out around Bakersfield?

HM:

Yeah, around Bakersfield. In 1950, Cleo and my grandmother operated this ranch until Cleo died, I think in '52 or '53. I can't remember when he died. They split the ranch up again and gave part of it to Cleo's kids and so, that's how that all kind of went down. Now, Cleo, all of his kids are—they're not kids. They're dead and gone. Every one of them. You know, Melody Berry [?]? She's Cleo's granddaughter.

Molly Yeager (MY):

Oh, I know Melody.

HM:

C. R. McKenzie was Cleo's—did you know C.R.?

MY:

No, I know Melody.

HM:

You knew Bill Ed? Do you know Bill Ed? You knew Greg? Greg McKenzie?

MY:

No, I don't. I haven't lived here that long, but I know Melody from the library. [laughter]

AW:

I know about Bill Ed. I've heard of his name.

HM:

Bill Ed is a good guy.

AW:

How did your dad wind up in Tucumcari?

HM:

My dad and my grandmother and Cleo all went partners and bought this ranch in New Mexico in 1938. It's on I-40. They also bought a ranch up at Mount Taylor. Do you know where Mount Taylor is?

AW:

No, I don't know. Where is Mount Taylor?

HM:

It's above Grants, New Mexico.

AW:

Oh, yeah. I know where Grants is.

HM:

It's up there and anyway, after Cleo died, they ended up selling that ranch at Mount Taylor. That went in his estate. They traded out—my dad traded out, I guess, his interest in Fort Stockton deal with for the ranch up in New Mexico.

AW:

By Tucumcari?

HM:

Well, it is a hundred miles west of Tucumcari.

AW:

Oh, okay.

HM:

Like I said, when they started that irrigation project at Tucumcari, my dad—my dad was one of these guys that he's kind of like his dad. Lookie here, we can get an irrigated farm, and then we can raise our calves here and we can take them to an irrigated farm and we can make the feed lot. We can feed the cattle their feed, and we can use the manure from the cattle on the field and all of that. That's what he did. My dad was a—he liked to get things started, but he didn't really like to sit there and make it happen. We had one manager after another and some of them, the really good ones would stay for a year or two and help you good and then, they'd be ambitious and want to go do something on their own. Or else, you got some that weren't very good and we never were really successful with that farm. When I got out of college—

AW:

That's tough farming country.

HM:

It's good. You can raise really good alfalfa there. It's pretty good land, but the problem is it's an irrigation project, and it gets water out of Conchas Dam. I farmed there for ten years from '68 to '79, I guess. I moved down here in '79. I guess, two years we didn't have water. One year, we had two inches of water to farm with. I planted sunflowers. Sunflowers—sun oil is really good oil. I don't know if you've ever cooked with sun oil, but—

AW:

When I was growing up, my dad worked for Anderson Clayton.

HM:

Where?

AW:

Anderson Clayton, crushing cottonseed for cottonseed oil, so sun oil was a big—and then where I live in Lubbock, there were some years there in the seventies and eighties where there were a lot of sunflowers contracted. Were you growing sunflowers based on contract or was there—? Because that's an interesting business.

HM:

Well, when I planted them, they were some contract out for twenty-two cents a pound, and I thought, man, I can make good money with that deal, but they wouldn't take any more contracts, and so I planted them. We made a pretty nice crop of sunflowers. When a sunflower is wilting, it is a dry sucker because they've got a wonderful root system. Sunflowers don't need any fertilizer. You just need to plant them thin and the little moth, head moth, that gets in those sunflowers. If you don't spray them at the right time, well, they'll eat up your seed. I never had grown them before, but I knew about that moth because I had been told. You could see the little moths in the evening and I got them sprayed. We made a nice crop of sunflowers, but I ended up getting six cents a pound for them, hauled it from Portales to the—anyway, we had a little feed lot there, but we just mostly beat our head against the wall. We got short of, we were short of water and then, our business wasn't doing very good. We owed a lot of money and our bankers—we were financing with bank farm service agency. Not farm service agents, but like a production credit out of Uvalde, and anyway, they came and sat at my kitchen table and told us, "We got a lean on your land, and we got a lean on your cattle, and we got a lean your equipment, and you guys, we don't have nothing else to get a lean on. Y'all will have to do something else." And so, we leased—

AW:

And this was '78, '79, somewhere?

HM:

Yeah. My dad and I went to Washington.

AW:

Tractorcade?

HM:

You know when farmers were all driving there tractors to Washington?

AW:

Yeah, so you were a part of that?

HM:

Well, I didn't drive a tractor, but we went the first year and lobbied. The local farmers all gathered some money and they sent my dad and I and another couple of farmers. We all went, and it was pretty cool, all these farmers walking around Washington, D.C.

AW:

I know it. Yeah, we have, at Texas Tech, we have the largest collection of materials on the American Ag Movement in the country. I've done interviews all over with people who were there in '78 and that were on the Tractorcade in '79. Tell me what that was like to be there.

HM:

That was really, really interesting because I have to say, the police and everybody was real patient with all these farmers walking around lost and wandering around and knocking on doors and telling their story. We met in some church down there and you met people from all over. You know, Minnesota corn farmers and California farmers and Louisiana farmers. It was really a good deal. We didn't really get any big relief except what the government did as a result of that. It helped us as they – at that time, interest rate was getting really high and we owed a lot of money, so our debt service was killing us and they came up with—they gave small business administration authority to make loans to farmers, low interest rates. We were paying like, I don't know, fourteen or fifteen percent interest at the time and we owed, I don't remember, but close to a million dollars or something, and it was like, good Lord.

AW:

Yeah and fourteen percent, it's hard to stay ahead of that.

HM:

Yeah, in the market, you know, everything was pretty bad for us, so we applied for a small business loan and our county agent Billy helped us because it was based on what you were supposed to do. Hell, we didn't have any water. We couldn't do anything, but if you had water and you were a really good farmer, and so you'd made a pretty good—think well, I should have made X amount. Hell, you never made X amount, but you should have made it. We got a small business loan, but that was crazy because small business loan officers don't know anything about agriculture so the first time I went to Albuquerque and applied for that, he said, "We can't loan it to you guys. You'll never pay it back. You're in too bad of shape." I was like, well, let me come and explain. I went back and talked to him and he said, "We can't loan it to you because you're in too good of shape." [laughter] I said, "No, we're in just the right shape." We finally got our small business loan and we leased that farm at Tucumcari and we sold—we had this irrigated farm down there by Tunis Springs. I don't know if you know where Tunis Springs is. You know where the stage top is on—?

AW: Well, I'm staying at Molly and Floyd Yeager's.

HM:

Okay, well you go by the stage stop. They don't even have signs saying it's a stage stop, but that rest side is an old stage stop. They moved it from down below there and we owned that land and we put that—there's an irrigated farm down there, but it's not been farmed. We sold that to a neighbor, and we own a farm further down the road. We sold that just to get ourselves in better financial shape. We moved down here and my wife hated to move down here because she was working for the city of Tucumcari. She was a good-looking, young, smart gal, and she was going to Santa Fe and lobbying for Tucumcari and had a little apartment they had set up for her. She was writing speeches for the mayor to give and working on grant money. She had a cool job for her because was twenty-four, twenty-five. We moved down here and I promised if you don't like it after two years, we'll move back. She hated it after two years.

AW:

It didn't grow on her.

HM:

[laughter] I didn't – I had a rough marriage for a while. There's nothing for me to go back to in Tucumcari.

AW:

Right.

HM:

Molly Yeager was really good help for us because the first year we were here, we had some cousins, but didn't know anybody, and I thought, well this town's real clannish, and it's hard to make friends, and Molly kind of got us in the in-crowd because Molly is friendly and outgoing and knew everybody. She's really helped us socially, and now, I guess we wouldn't move, even my wife doesn't want to go back to Tucumcari anymore.

AW:

It's finally grown on her enough to—

HM:

About twenty-five years. [laughter]

AW:

What did you—when you moved back down here, you were farming? Is that right?

HM:

We have a farm and a ranch at about—eighteen-thousand acre ranch. It sounds like a lot of land, but it's about two-hundred and fifty cows or something which is—

AW:

So you're running cows and not sheep or goats?

HM:

We run—when we first came, we used to always run sheep, but we went out of the sheep business in about '60—about 1970. We quit running any or maybe it was a little later than that, but I remember at one time, our lamb crop—lambs brought ten cents a pound and had two years of wool in the wool house here and couldn't sell it. We've almost converted over to cattle. The varmints is what gets you too because before, you could get 1080 as a poison if coyotes killed a lamb or killed a calf. Well, you put some of that 1080 in there and they'd kill all the coyotes, but you'd also kill the ravens and everything else that eats on it which didn't bother ranchers much, but conservationists didn't want you to kill non-target species. You could get guys from Mexico and everybody knew how to trap and everybody knew how to fight the varmints. Where we ranch, north of our ranch, is mostly all cattle country and nobody fights the varmints much. If you don't have neighbors that help you, coyotes are coming at you all the time. We moved down here and all our fences were set up for sheep, little old, cobbled up deal, and so we've been working to kind of get it fixed up. We ran Angora goats for several years. My neighbor, Neil Woodward, he said, "Y'all ought to run you some goats." He ran goats.

AW:

Is Neil kin to Earnest?

HM:

Neil is Earnest's first cousin. Neil is our neighbor to the west. So we ran Angora goats for several years and we'd buy billy kids from people around Ozona or back where they could raise a lot of kids, and we'd run them on our hayfield, on alfalfa fields through the winter and the first of March, we'd start watering our hay to start growing alfalfa. Those billy kids grow a lot of hair, and we'd shear them about the first of March and then we'd turn them out on the pasture. We did that until the government got rid of—they had incentive mohair prices, either worth nothing or worth a whole lot, and there was a program to stabilize mohair prices, and it was financed with import tariff on finished wool and Mohair goods coming in, you know, dresses and coats and stuff. I can't remember, it was before Clinton, I guess it was maybe in Reagan's administration, anyway, the last to Reagan or they did away with mohair and they killed that industry. A few counties in Texas produced a third of the world's mohair. People had spent seventy-five years developing the best goats with the least camp and the finest hair. After they did that, they just put Spanish billies on their nannies [?]. It was a sad deal because we lost that whole industry, and now, you can't find enough Angora goats to count them.

AW:

I noticed that Paul Yeager has got goats at his place.

HM:

He's got meat goats.

AW:

Yeah, right and not hair. Wasn't San Angelo, they used to have Miss Mohair beauty contests every year? It was a really big deal.

HM:

Oh, yeah. Goats are perfect for us to run because our country has got limestone mesas, and your cattle won't hardly ever graze those mesas and you could turn those goats out. Well, that's where they eat all around. They stay on the hills. They just drop down to water and then drop back.

AW:

Are they less susceptible to predation than sheep?

HM:

We were [inaudible] muttons, so it takes a bigger animal to kill a mutton because he'd be a hundred pounds or a hundred and ten pounds. Bobcats and coyotes will kill the heck out of him,

but the eagles and coons and eagles and foxes won't bother you. Hey, Molly. My problem with the goats was bobcats started eating on us pretty bad on the north side. The other thing is, we have lachagea [?] [36:45]. You know what lachagea is? Goats eat that lachagea in the winter time. If they don't have—if it's a dry winter, it destroys their liver. Their eyes will turn yellow and you shear them that spring and they'll die and there's nothing you can do about it. Back then, you buy a goat, a kid, for twenty-five dollars or eighteen dollars and you shear it one time, you'd almost pay for him. It was a pretty good deal. If you had some loss, you could take it.

AW:

How many years would you shear the same animal? How many shearings could you get?

HM:

Till he was not there anymore.

AW:

It was a lot. That was a good—

HM:

You shear them twice a year, we did. A goat grows an inch of hair a month so you've got six inches of hair in six months, so that's about what you ought to get. That kid hair, it might be worth eight or ten dollars a pound. An adult may be worth a dollar and a half or two dollars a pound. Goats are more fun to work than anything because they're smart. You get sheep to go to a gate and sheep go around and around and around and around. Goats, they're smart and they just—they're smart and they're fun to work with a dog and everything.

AW:

So you worked them with a dog?

HM:

I did.

AW:

My experience goats was they were too smart to be—

HM:

What's that?

AW:

They were too smart, the goats were, when I was a kid. They were always outsmarting us.
[laughter]

HM:

It's wonderful to work—that's one of my favorite things to do is work goats with a dog. You can send that dog around and bring them up. You can just walk behind those goats. If they go through the wrong gate or something, we just send that dog and bring them back. It's not like, oh we got to hurry. That dog can run a lot faster than you can.

AW:

What kind of dogs did you use?

HM:

Border collies. Really, border collies is the only dog that's—I don't know everything about all dogs. Australian Shepherds are pretty good, but they're not near as—they're a good all-around dog, but border collies are a wonderful working dog. They're so damn smart and so athletic, but they want to work. That's all they care about. Let me work. I had a good old border collie that Bill Johnson gave me, old Dollar. That was the best—he was a really good dog. You would go out in the afternoon and he wasn't at home and the farm is over the hill and on the other side of the —about a mile away and I'd drive over there looking for Dollar and he'd have our goats all gathered up. [laughter]

HM:

He'd be going around them and around them and around them. I'd put him in a pen and then he'd jump out of the pen, and I'll you show you, Dollar. I'll just tie you up in the pen and so I tied him up in the pen and then that son of a gun jumped over and hung himself. I was sorry to see that dog—you learn how to take care of your dog by making mistakes sometimes. Anyway, dogs are a lot of fun, good dogs. I like dogs. You had a good dog, didn't you? Anyway, so now, we're out of the goat business, and we farm and raise alfalfa hay, and we're in the perfect place to raise alfalfa hay because going east, nobody raises alfalfa hay. They just can't raise it very good. A few little places, but—

AW:

They don't have the water?

HM:

They don't have the—you need dry weather to put up pretty alfalfa. You need it to dry up if you want to put green, pretty alfalfa, and so our climate's good and you go east here, they got more humidity and then the other thing they run into is root rot problems.

AW:

Is it because the soil is different than here? Doesn't drain as well?

HM:

I guess some of it is soil. I think it's—I don't know. They can grow alfalfa, but it doesn't last long and you get—

AW:

Protein not as good as yours.

HM: What's that?

AW:

The protein's not as good as yours because I think dry helps protein, doesn't it?

HM:

I don't think—I don't know if that had anything to do with protein. The dry weather be dry. What has to do with protein is how many leaves—leaves would be like thirty—I don't know, thirty-two percent protein and the stems are maybe ten percent protein so the more leaves you got, the more protein you have. The trick in alfalfa is to bale it with all the leaves on it, and the other thing that has to do with protein is immaturity of the plant. If you cut that hay before it blooms much, you're protein will be a lot higher. We kind of cut every twenty-eight or tried to stay on a schedule like that. We don't keep on it too good because—I mean, we watch the weather. Sometimes, we cut a little earlier. Sometimes, we cut a little bit later because we try to miss a rainstorm because rain can hurt you. We're pretty lucky. We have a small farm and we have a lot of water. We've got plenty of equipment and then, I've got most of my daughters and my wife and son-in-law and if we need four people baling one night, we'll just get them up and get them on a tractor.

AW:

[laughter] So, they all live here in Stockton? Your daughters?

HM:

They live out at the ranch. Yeah, both of my daughters have moved back. My oldest daughter, Sarah has kind of taken over. We raised and registered Angus and we have a bull sale every year and we have a bull sale in March and so she's—she went to Kansas State to get a master's in entomology, and so she helps us with our bugs too. She's got a business degree from New Mexico State, and so she does our marketing and keeps our records and she's kind of the—I'm trying to—she's a head honcho on cattle. My other daughter, Lydia, is a physical therapist. She just got a job working here in town in the hospital, but her husband's looking at working on a farm. They just moved back last year, but we got a little compound out there.

AW:

That's cool.

HM:

I'm trying to back out, but it's hard to turn over everything because you don't want them to make any mistakes and I know that I've already made all the mistakes that need to be made.

AW:

That's right.

HM:

I got some cough drops from Mexico.

MY:

You want some coffee?

HM:

You got some coffee? I'll take some coffee. Anyway, we started off with our bull sale and like they say, anything worth doing is worth doing poorly until you do better. [laughter] So, our first sale, everybody sat on hay bales and we had a novice auctioneer, and we'd get one bid and we'd sell one bull for one bid, you know, [laughter] but last year, we had a real successful sale. Every year—this will be our tenth year this year.

AW:

And so, you're doing this live and not on the web?

HM:

No, not on the web. It's a live deal and we're—right now, we enjoy—I don't think there's any bull sales from San Angelo to the other side of El Paso or maybe to Arizona.

AW:

So, you're it?

HM:

Yeah, I mean, Roswell has a sale, but people like to go to bull sales, so we try to make a party and I credit my dad with that. We kept raising more bulls and more bulls. You know when you sell them private treaty, well, somebody comes there early and they buy some and then another guy comes and then the third guy comes and says, "Hell, all the good ones have been gone." You know?

AW:

Yeah, right.

HM:

Thank you [for coffee]. Anyway, it was risky. It's a scary deal to have a bull sale because if you're going to have all your production and you hope people come and you hope somebody holds their handle up.

AW:

Thank you, Molly [for coffee].

HM:

If you don't take risks—every time I've taken risks in my life, it's been good, but we're still scared to take risks. Anybody listening to this in a hundred years well, take risks. [laughter]

AW:

Yeah. Well, you know it's very interesting—

HM:

Don't be afraid to take risks.

AW:

The description you have of your father and your grandfather—all the different kinds of ways that they went about trying to build businesses and an estate of land and things to do and being over-extended and going from one thing to the other. That's an exact description though, of how success out in the West has occurred. You know, if you don't do those things, you're never going to make it, so I think it's a great story. You've got a great story.

HM:

Yeah and you never know. We developed this farm. They put a pipeline through the ranch here at Fort Stockton.

AW:

The gas pipe.

HM:

A gas pipeline and so my dad—this was in about 1962, and so my dad said, "Well, give us a farm tap where we can buy gas from." They had drilled a gas well, in fact, where our shop is and everything, there's a pad for a gas well they drilled. They drilled a test well across the draw and they got a bunch of water for gas. Anyway, they left that and then they drilled a water well right

there where that pad was to use in their drilling process and it was a really strong well. We had two strong wells and a gas pipeline running through there, and it's a big old wide drawl. It's in a monument draw, and so my dad said, "Well, hell. We can make a farm here." Of course, he didn't want to farm it, but he wanted to make a farm. [laughter] We root plowed that area and put a farm in in about 1962 and '63. We spent a lot of money doing that. I mean, that over extended us, and our banker wasn't happy with that. We never made any money with that farm. I moved down here in '79 and we were still flood irrigating and we still had all the wore-out old, wore-out equipment and that's all you did is fight wore-out equipment. Irrigation motors were old. Irrigation motors off of some drilling rig from thirty years ago. You know, some big ole Leroy or Waukesha [?] or something that's obsolete.

AW:

Yeah, hard to get parts for.

HM:

You'd have it going pretty good, and then in the morning, it would be dead and you'd have to crank it up again and fight and go for holes. It was a mess, and for about nine years, we worked on—and I never did very good much with the farming. For nine years that I was here, I mean, it was just hard work and holding your own, and I guess luck just smiled on us. They had a gas plant down the road that was using arsenic, arsenic solution to strip off CO₂ from natural gas. They just dumped arsenic solution in a big old dirt tank when they were through with. That became a super fun project to clean up the environmental hazards. They needed—they dug a big hole—their idea was dig a hole and put a clay moisture barrier there in plastic and then encapsulate that hole, all that contaminated area, put it in a big hole, and then cover it up. It wouldn't go down because it was already seventy-foot down towards the water. Well, the waters over there is 400 foot deep. I don't know if it will ever get there. Anyway, so they did this, but they needed dirt for this clay moisture barrier. They came all the way down to us, and we sold them like a thousand big truckloads of dirt right out of the middle of our farm. Our farm has real deep soil there and so they took four or five feet of, maybe six feet of soil. They took—kind of put the topsoil off and then put it back. With that money that we got from that dirt sale, we put in sprinkler systems and that changed the world for us. It's like the Nile River basin before they built the Aswan Dam because when that does run, well, all the sheep manure and everything runs in there and fertilizes that low area where they took that dirt, so it grows just as good of hay as anything else. We sold the farm kind of like that aggie walked out of that house of ill repute. He said, "I don't get. She had it and she sold it, but she still has it." [laughter]

AW:

And so you did the same thing with your farm. [laughter]

HM:

Yeah. [laughter] We did the same thing. We still got it, but that farm has been a good—I farmed at Tucumcari for ten years and then I farmed at Fort Stockton for ten years, but after we put a sprinkler system in well, we quit being just hard labor and not very productive to becoming harvesters. We harvest the hay, and it made all difference in our hole. We use less water and get more done, and it's been wonderful. I can't complain. That was one of the best things we did. [sniffles]

AW:

How is your water holding up? I assume that all this irrigation is from your wells, right?

HM:

That's correct. We've been there fifty years. It wasn't fifty years now, fifty longer. Fifty-four years. It used to be about a hundred and fifty foot. You know, your static down to water. When we pump, it's about two-twenty or two-thirty. Last time, in May here, instead of a hundred and fifty, it was a hundred and sixty. When you're pumping water, it's still about two-twenty and we got a monitor well. Oh, it's about a half a mile from the farm. It's on our neighbor's, but it doesn't fluctuate at all. It's pretty strong water there and the other thing is is nobody's pulling water out of there for miles. We're the only ones, and so we're lucky. I mean, I don't know how much water there is there, but—

AW:

Well, if it's staying that constant that's a pretty—

HM:

Yeah, it's like the Panhandle where you got one farm and another farm and another farm and another farm and everybody's pumping. We're just one little deal out there pumping, and it sounds like a lot of water, but the other day I drove from Abilene to Wichita Falls. I don't know, but after they had that snow and they had rain and snow and miles and miles and miles and miles and miles and miles of waterlogged land. You're thinking, how much water came out of the clouds? Man that is a lot of water. It couldn't run irrigation motors long enough to even get one of those fields that wet. It's a heck of a deal.

AW:

Yeah and that's up in our country. We've got that—all that water more often than every twenty years, like that snow, we'd be in good shape. [laughter]

HM:

Yeah. It got wet up in Lubbock. You live in Lubbock?

AW:

Yeah. Oh, it got real wet. We had twelve inches of really wet snow. In fact, I was telling Molly this morning at breakfast that it was four days that week we didn't even get—the mailman didn't even come to our house and we live in the middle of town. We don't live outside of town.

[laughter]

HM:

My wife was in a car wreck the tenth of December. Anyways, and I was up in Lubbock here just to wait till they flew up there for the—

AW:

How is she doing?

HM:

She's doing really well. She had a head-on in Pecos and broke both her arms and three ribs.

AW:

Oh my gosh.

HM:

And punctured her lung and hurt her neck, but she's lucky to be alive.

AW:

Oh, yeah. A head on.

HM:

It's a testament to airbags and seatbelts and she can be just like new when she's nearly—she's healing up pretty good.

AW:

Oh, that's good to hear.

HM:

But that's the best hospital in the world, that one in Lubbock.

AW:

The Covenant or the UMC [University Medical Center]?

HM:

UMC.

AW:

That's a very a good one. My brother spent a lot of time in that hospital, but it's a good one.

HM:

She came – flew her up there at midnight and seven o'clock the very next morning—that Sunday morning, they were operating on her, fixing her arms and the guy put plates in both arms and she could use her right arm. They didn't even it in the cast, and it was broken into three pieces.

AW:

Wow. Hurts to even think about.

HM:

It was amazing. Amazing. Anyway, I guess, I don't know what other thing to tell you.

AW:

I just got a couple other questions if you've got some time. What was Tucumcari like when you were growing up?

HM:

Tucumcari was really the good town when I was growing up. The railroad was a big deal and farming, we're doing pretty good and I guess when I graduated, my brother was a year behind me and he was in the biggest class that graduated and they graduated, I don't know, a hundred and sixty people and I graduated a hundred and forty or something. It was really a good town to live in, I thought. Now they graduate forty people or thirty-five and my mother-in-law, she taught school there and then she moved back there for a while, but she said, "Tucumcari has one grocery store and two tattoo parlors." [laughter] That's the way she described it which is pretty good. They all, you know, it went from a really nice town to—I walk around there and sometimes people have pit bull tied in front and a chain got all the grass, [laughter] as far as he can reach. He can get almost out to the sidewalk, you know. That's not all the houses, but a few houses like that, almost like the pit bull capital of I don't know where. It's sad because it was such a nice town, and it's still a nice town, I'm sure, but doesn't have a lot of opportunity unless you want to work in a restaurant or clean motel rooms or drive a truck.

AW:

Usually when you go to a town and there are a lot of pit bulls in the front yard, it's an indication of drug trafficking, that sort of thing. It's kind of sad. What other question—how do you see the future for Fort Stockton?

HM:

For Fort Stockton?

AW:

Mhmm.

HM:

You know, when I left Tucumcari and came down here, I was surprised how wealthy this town was. Of course, the oil boom was going, but they had—you know, in Tucumcari, anybody that's got one of those big houses, ah, he's a big rich guy. Well, Fort Stockton had a lot of nice, big houses you know? And I thought, damn, this is a pretty rich town here, and Fort Stockton, you know, I can remember in high school, we didn't feel like we were poor or anything, but we had an old cinder track and all our warm-ups in track were ripped and stuff. [laughing] And then, come over here and my daughter's in the eighth grade and they've got the school furnishes shoes for the grey team and the blue team and the white team and all the little girls have shoes furnished and got a rubberized track and everything is first class. Anyway, Fort Stockton has got a different attitude. It's a good town with a good attitude and I've been impressed with Fort Stockton. You know, Hispanic folks here have been oppressed in a lot of ways. When I was in high school, I went to the movie house down here, and if you were Hispanic you had to sit in a balcony. You couldn't sit with the white folks. I didn't even pay much attention to that, but I've been impressed that there's not more resentment. I haven't seen all that. I came from New Mexico where there is a lot of resentment between the Hispanics and Anglos. Here, I come here—Hispanics were never oppressed that much in New Mexico. Well, maybe they were earlier. I don't know.

AW:

Four hundred years ago.

HM:

They oppressed the Indians. [laughter] Everything is getting better, and Fort Stockton has got a good attitude. It's a forward looking, positive attitude town. I think it's a good town.

AW:

Well, let me—it's been a great interview. I want to tell you, next time you're in Lubbock, you've got my card and don't hesitate to give me a call if you're there, and I'll take you to the archive and show you around what we do. M-c-K-e-n-z-i-e? Right?

HM:

That's correct.

MY:

What is your wife's name?

HM:

My wife? Laura?

MY:

Laura? Okay.

AW:

One other question while I'm filling this out. This is a thing to give us permission to let other people listen to your interview. You mentioned letters, your grandfather, and tally books and that kind of thing. Are those archives someplace?

HM:

No. In fact, we can find it. You know, my granddad and Uncle Bob at Fort Sumner, they had a bunch of buffalo at Fort Sumner a long time ago. It was in the twenties, and we got letters from Charles Goodnight.

AW:

Goodnight is my uncle.

HM:

Charles Goodnight is? Well, he bought those buffalo from my granddad. [laughter]

AW:

I was going to ask you if they were connected because in those years, anybody that was connected with buffalo had some connection to Goodnight.

HM:

Goodnight lived in Oklahoma somewhere.

AW:

No, he either lived in Goodnight, Texas, in the twenties or then he wintered in Arizona.

HM:

Okay, well we've got letters—

AW:

Now he traveled a lot, so there's no telling where you where you got the letters from.

HM:

My wife had—and I don't know, she might can put her hands on those letters, but I could fax you a copy of them.

AW:

At some point, somebody, we'd like it to be at our place. It doesn't have to be, but some university ought to get those things to archive because that way they could be available to people two-hundred years from now to do their research and so forth. The letters, besides that that you were talking about those tally books. That is very worthy information.

HM:

What's that now?

AW:

The tally books you mentioned. That's the kind of thing you can't look up.

HM:

I started to bring that to you. I don't know how long you're going to be around.

AW:

I'll be here all day today. I've got to leave pretty early tomorrow.

HM:

Oh, you're going to stay with Molly tonight?

AW:

Yeah, come by.

HM:

I could bring them over there or meet you somewhere.

AW:

Yeah, that would be really nice. That's really interesting stuff. I'd like, after I digest a little bit of this, I might like to do another interview with you because the story of your family is really, really interesting to me and as you were describing, all that—as you said overextended. I can't think of a successful rancher, farmer, pioneer, developer, that wasn't in the same spot. You know? More than once.

HM:

Well, my dad, man, my dad had lots of good ideas, but I've taken the other step. My brother ranches—takes care of that ranch in New Mexico and he's ten years younger me. Now, there was four of us boys and my sister. One of my brothers has passed away, but my little brother takes care of that ranch up there. Of course, I'm ten years older, and I went through a period of time—about the time you're forty to fifty-five, well, you think I'm smart enough. I've been around long enough. I know how to do stuff. By god, I'm going to make something happen and then, you get over sixty and you think, what the hell? I've been doing pretty good. Why do I want to take all these chances and go harder? I want to spend a little time doing things I want to do. My brother—he was, "We can buy this ranch next to us." Hell, we already owed a whole bunch of damn money and he wasn't getting all of his own windmills fixed. I said, "We've got enough windmills to fix. You don't need more stuff. You can't take care of what you've got." Hell, and then, he throws it up to me, "Well, if we'd bought that back then, we'd be worth a lot more know." I said, "Well, what the hell."

AW:

I've found that when I was worth more, I always owed more. [laughter] When it got down to the net part, I never did change very much.

HM:

I'll tell you what—our little—ever since I got out of college, we've just taken little wages. We lived fine, but we never—we tried to make our business successful and we never took much out of it. We finally got out of debt. We finally in good shape now, but hell, we had a hell of a bull sale this last year. It was amazing. Everything was right because neighbors had a little oil money, a little extra money and it rained everybody had grass and cattle prices were really high. Everybody said, "Boy, I really want some of what you've got."

AW:

That's good.

HM:

May not happen again. [laughter]

AW:

What's your mailing address, Houston?

HM:

[REDACTED]

AW:
The zip?

HM:
[REDACTED]

AW:
What's the best way to get ahold of you? Phone or e-mail?

HM:
My phone, probably. My cell phone is [REDACTED]. Don't you play music too?

AW:
Yeah.

HM:
What do you play? Fiddle?

AW:
Guitar. I write songs. That's how I got this job at Tech because I did all my research there at the archive, a lot of it, to write the songs and stories and plays and things that I do. They said, "Why aren't you out collecting these things?" I used to come down here a lot.

HM:
Yeah, you've been here at summer on the patio. I've seen you.

AW:
Back when Mary Kay was there. I've been coming that long.

HM:
I play the harmonica, but I never—I play like a straight harp and I never have been able to be patient enough. I even got me a CD that tells me how to play blue harmonica. I played with a friend of mine, was a good musician. He played in one key and I played my harp in a different key and it sounded like—

AW:
That's what you do.

HM:

That sounds really cool, but I never have run into anybody else smart enough to know what key to play.

AW:

It's the four. If he's in C, you need to be in an F-harp. If he's in D, you need to be in with a G-harp. All you have to do is know you're one, four, five, and you'll know what harp to play with. My son is harp player. Except, he's one of those that can bend the notes and do all that. I can't do that. I'm the old Bob Dylan type where you have the thing that holds it up here and you have to play the straight—

HM:

Yeah, blow several at the same time. I was listening to NPR, this harp player, he could play any key he wanted to on any harp and you've got to have a damn good brain to do that because it's like learning how to type and you know where everything is, and then, okay, now all the keys are in different places. [laughter] You've got to have a good brain.

AW:

Plus, the harp is only that long and it starts over.

HM:

You've got to bend certain notes and you've got to start—

AW:

Do you ever get on YouTube and watch the music videos on that?

HM:

Sometimes. I watch Doug Kershaw. [laughter]

AW:

I met Doug Kershaw once. He's just as crazy as you think he is.

HM:

I tell you what, I'll get on YouTube and get "Diggy Diggy Lo" and he really has fun playing that. It makes me happy every time. If I want to be happy, I just look up Doug Kershaw.

AW:

I sat as far as from me to you at a little, tiny club in Denver in the seventies when he was there. It was back when he was wearing those velvet pants. Gosh, he was crazy. Some brothers call us Sgro brothers. S-g-r-o.

HM:

S?

AW:

S-g-r-o. They played—they were on some of those variety shows of the fifties and you can find them on YouTube. These guys were—

HM:

Sgro?

AW:

Yeah. They played—there were like three or four of them and one of them would play one of those big harps and one would play a little harp and another one would play a normal sized harp. It was—it's phenomenal. There's another group from maybe a little earlier, the forties, called Harmonicats.

HM:

Oh, yeah. I've heard of them.

AW:

Well, the Sgro brothers were like them on acid or something. [laughter] They were just—but, being a harp player, you'd really enjoy watching that.

HM:

Harmonica is a simple instrument. It sounds pretty even if you're not accomplished. I mean, if you'll just play simple songs, anybody can play a pretty song.

AW:

Still, to be good at it, you've got to do some work.

HM:

Yeah, but you can carry it around anywhere you go. Easier than a piano. [laughter]

AW:

All right, well if you get the chance to come by this evening, we'll be there at Molly and Paul's.

HM:

If I don't—if I feel good enough, I'll see if I can bring that deal by and let you look at it.

AW:

Great, thanks.

MY:

Thank you. Nice to meet you.

HM:

Nice to meet you.

AW:

Thanks again. Thanks for coming. I know you don't feel good.

HM:

I don't really feel that bad, but I don't sound very good.

Jody Day (JD):

Is Molly having you sign these cards, too?

AW:

I don't know. Let me close this interview by saying this is Andy Wilkinson. It's the twelfth of January, 2016.

HM:

You can give an oral thank you, this is oral history. [laughter]

AW:

Myself, Joey Day, Molly Yeager have just been visiting with Houston McKenzie here at the library in Fort Stockton.

[end of recording]