

**Oral History Interview of
John Segulia**

**Interviewed by: Richard Mason
July 10, 1984
Tornillo, Texas**

**Part of the:
*Agriculture Interviews***

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Preferred Citation for this Document:

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Recording Notes:

Original Format: Audio Cassette

Digitization Details: digitized May 2018

Audio Metadata: 44.1kHz/ 16bit WAV file

Further Access Restrictions: N/A

Related Interviews:

Transcription Notes:

Interviewer: Richard Mason

Audio Editor: N/A

Transcription: Bill Corrigan

Editor(s): Kayci Rush

Final Editor: Elissa Stroman

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Transcript Overview:

This interview features John Seguila as he discusses being a cotton farmer in the El Paso region. In this interview, Seguila describes how his father decided on what land to farm on, and the lessons Seguila has learned while farming.

Length of Interview: 01:34:24

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Keywords

Farming, Agriculture, Cotton, Irrigation

Richard Mason (RM):

—John Segulia, and this is July 10, 1984.

John Segulia (JS):

Now, where do you want me to start at?

RM:

With when and where you were born.

JS:

Let's see, I was born in what used to be Austria, Hungary, in a town named Novi, N-o-v-i. That's down on the Adriatic Sea. And I was brought into the United States by my father when I was about a year old, and we stayed over here until I was about five and went back to what now is Yugoslavia. And we got caught over there during the World War I, we couldn't get back into the United States in 1920. And we came later part of 1920 or early part of '21. In January '21 we got into the Tornillo, Texas.

RM:

I wonder, sir if we might review why it was your father, your family moved to the United States, and then how was it they learned about this area right here?

JS:

Well my father, meanwhile my father was a—he worked at the copper mine in Bisbee, over there in Arizona he decided he was a farmer at heart. He started farming over in Yuma, Arizona. But this was—he was such a large man, he was six two or three, and he weighed at, oh, two hundred twenty or thirty pounds, and he couldn't stand that heat over in Arizona, he started looking around. This was before the air conditioner—he started looking around, he says, "I'm going to get on a train and go east, and the first place I find that I can sleep at night I'm going to farm." And he got as far as El Paso, he heard about the Elephant Butte getting finished in 1916, and they started farming, generally started farming down in the El Paso Valley. And he bought a farm down here at Tornillo. It was half-developed, and the other half brush, and he put it into cultivation himself. In fact, I helped him do it, I was the oldest boy, I helped him do it, 1921.

RM:

I wonder if you could describe clearing that brush, how that was done.

JS:

That brush was done with a shovel and dug a little hole around the stump and cut off with an axe. And it was cut off about, oh, ten inches, and the stumps left in there. And we plowed with the mules, and that's the way plowed, just down in the bottom of that, way it was cut. And about

twenty years later we got the tractors, we started plowing deep and we turned up the stumps all over the farm.

RM:

I imagine that was quite a bit of work. How long would it take you clear out an acre?

JS:

An acre? I don't remember now, but some of it was pretty clear, some of it was brushy, so the hardest part of it was mesquite, because mesquite had a pretty big root down there. Now the cottonwood, the young cottonwood and willows, some willows grew, oh, about this. There wasn't too much to cut off.

RM:

I wonder if you might describe some of the other farming operations that were taking place at that time. Was this land just being put into cultivation down there?

JS:

Yeah, this land and El Paso. Now the El Paso Valley being a—underground water comes up close to the surface. They had to dig drainages to drain excess water. If not, why, the water come up top and bring the alkali, you couldn't grow no crops on it. So they dug the drainages all over El Paso Valley, up to the Fabens now. From Fabens, this Tornillo district, wasn't water, drainages wasn't dug until the last part of the project was finished, and meanwhile after the drainage was dug on that we had to build a—we had to put the land into squares and build what they called a border with a Fresno. Four mules and a Fresno, built the borders about, oh, a couple feet high and flood it with a lot of water, and kept the water in there thirty days dry that alkali down. And after that that land was good as any. In fact, we still do the same thing down in Hudspeth County where we still got the alkali coming through the ground, through the surface.

RM:

Now as you go ahead a build a border, a bench and a border, and you go ahead and flood that for a month or so.

JS:

Right.

RM:

And allow the water to wash out the alkali.

JS:

Right.

RM:

The Tornillo district that formed to build the drainage districts, was this kind of a local enterprise or was this related to the—

JS:

No, this was the Bureau of Reclamation, except this being the last part of the district that didn't get down here to the last of the 1920s.

RM:

Um-hm.

JS:

And that when he really started farming. Because places alkali come you couldn't raise nothing.

RM:

Um-hm. Where was the land that you farmed? You and your father?

JS:

Oh here at—let's see, about half a mile west of Tornillo, and then about a mile south, southwest from Tornillo toward Mexico.

RM:

Um-hm. Who were some of your neighbors?

JS:

Mr. Clyde Mavis, W.T. Young, Stewart Shire. That's the immediate neighbors, then we had some further away from here—Mr. Henderson, Mr. Schaeffer, Mr. Schluss [?] [00:07:06]—Stone and that's about it, the closest ones anyway.

RM:

Um-hm. When it came time to clear land and also to build these borders, and to wash the alkali out, did all the neighbors work together on that?

JS:

No, each individual farmer did it, because if they might have had a half of farm that was in good shape, why they made a living off of it, and then they get the other half ready.

RM:

Um-hm. What were some of the early crops that were raised on these farms?

JS:

Alfalfa, alfalfa grew, oh man it was a big—we used to make a big crop of alfalfa, because we had water, plenty of water at the time, and alfalfa gets lots of water. And cotton. Because cotton, the land was rich at the time, it didn't even need a fertilizer to make two bales an acre. And we had plenty, was able to hand pick it, and when you hand pick it, you go in there soon as about four or five bolls open, pick it, out, you're going to have to do—you don't have to wait like you do now, picking machine. You don't get in there with a machine until you've got about a three quarters of a bale open. So that's probably the reason we made more cotton then—and the land was in a good shape. It wasn't run over with tractors, now the tractors probably do as much harm as do good.

RM:

Um-hm, they make for hard pan?

JS:

Yeah, hard pan.

RM:

Okay. W.T. Young, was he a cotton breeder?

JS:

He was the one to start this Acala cotton.

RM:

Do you know the story on that?

JS:

Well, he was—well I know when he came over here he was farming right next to us over at Tornillo. He waited until it was pretty hot and warm before he planted his doggone cotton. He came out there and walked it and everything else, and when it came to cotton picking time, why he carried a little pocket comb with him and combed the doggone cotton out. Combed it out and then he snapped it, you know the old-time graders, they could snap the cotton and tell you what grade it was, staple and everything.

RM:

That amazes me.

JS:

Yeah, he'd just pop them, they'd know what it is. And he was good at that. The reasons—when he was down from East Texas, but he was a contractor here during the war I think, and after the

war he had lots of equipment. Mules and equipment left, he went farming. He bought about four hundred acres right here at Tornillo, then they moved down to Acala, Texas here about three or four thousand acres down there. That's where his big farm was at, a big production. Built a gin up there. Ginned his own seed. And that's where Acala Cotton got started.

RM:

Um-hm. Once he got the Acala breed established, is that generally what the farmers in this valley raised?

JS:

All of it. All of the cotton during the early part of this was raised, they were raising Acala Cotton. And naturally, it developed into different strains and lint and this and that and it spread all over the Western part of the United States. In fact, California SJ-1 up San Joaquin Valley, that was bred—that's Acala Cotton, bred from Acala.

RM:

And I understand the Del Cerro?

JS:

That's also—

RM:

Was a descendent of the Acala.

JS:

Yeah, Dean Stone [?] [00:11:21] manned up around [inaudible] [00:11:26] he turned all of his land into pecan. He's the one that developed the Del Cerro. What happened developed it fast, taking it, going to Mexico, make a two crop, make crop over there, make two crops in Mexico, and he really developed seed fast that way.

RM:

Um-hm. Was that that breeding station down there along the coast in Mexico?

JS:

He probably had one himself. But now, somebody got a breeding station down there along the coast, and—some cotton—

RM:

Yeah, the name escapes me, but people will still send their cotton down—

JS:

Oh yeah, they're still developing the cotton down there. And it escapes me, the name too.

RM:

Well once these Acala, the Acala cotton breed came on the market, did people switch from alfalfa and grow cotton primarily here in the valley?

JS:

Well at the time, the people were strapped financially, and they kept one third of their land in alfalfa, on rotation. And then for the simple reason they had to have a feed to feed their mules, the horses. That's the reason they kept about one third of their land in alfalfa, feed crop.

RM:

Was it one third feed crop and then two thirds cotton?

JS:

Cotton, right.

RM:

And cotton was a big cash crop at that time.

JS:

Cotton was a big cash crop, right.

RM:

Generally when it came time to harvest it, where was it ginned? Where did you all get your cotton ginned?

JS:

They had more gins there at the time. In fact they had—let's see they got—Davey Gill had a gin way down in McNary. He had a gin over—another gin was over there, Bob Biby [?] [00:13:39] had a gin over, also McNary. Dave Gill's gin was way down, down his place. That was McNary, and Glen Campbell had one at Port Hancock, and Haskell Cook had one up here at Acala. Then we had two gins at Tornillo. Two gins at—three gins at Fabens, and two or three at out at Clint ____ [?] [00:14:17] we had plenty of gins in fact. We've only got two gins left now, I don't know what happened to it. We've got—saw gin, one gin at Clint, another at Fabens. We've got saw gin at Tornillo, but we're not weighing it because we don't have enough cotton to keep it operating. Then we've got a three—____ [00:14:42] gin Pima cotton, one at Tornillo, one at Fabens, one at Clint.

RM:

When did these smaller gins begin to disappear?

JS:

Oh, whenever the government started cutting down on cotton acres, nineteen—what the heck was it—1932 I think, or '33.

RM:

Um-hm, '32, '33.

JS:

Thirty three.

RM:

So when the allotment came in—

JS:

Allotment came in.

RM:

Why, the gins went out.

JS:

Went out. When Hudspeth County lost most of their gins when a drought hit them in 1951. And they closed down most of their gins.

RM:

They're not part of the Elephant Butte project, right? The Hudspeth County people?

JS:

No, they're not. They're supposed to be on a project around the compact anyway, but they entered a compact, and that's where the compact concerned with the New Mexico and Colorado, but it _____ [00:15:55] Elephant Butte project, that's the difference.

RM:

And so right now they and Hudspeth County generally of the waste or drainage water that comes out of the—

JS:

Yeah, wastewater, rain, so forth.

RM:

Out of the El Paso district.

JS:

Uh-huh.

RM:

When did people begin to mechanize in this area?

JS:

Nineteen thirty—thirty-four or thirty-five. When the rubber tires first came out for the tractors. We had tractors all along, but they had iron wheels, and whenever you hit a sandy spot, why, you got stuck. They couldn't do too much with them, but when the rubber tires got invented, man, everybody jumped into the tractors. I mean, mules and horses disappeared.

RM:

Just almost immediately.

JS:

Immediately, right.

RM:

So by 1940 were most of the people mechanized in this area?

JS:

Oh yeah, yeah, they were.

RM:

Do you remember the variety tractors that were being sold at that time?

JS:

Well at the time the International Farmall ten twenty and ten thirty or twenty thirty, I don't know what devil the name, that was the biggest tractor for the simple reason the man that owned the ____ [?] [00:17:38] company there, dealers in International tractors, they was also the banker, they was also financing. That helped sell a lot of International tractors, Farmall tractors.

RM:

Okay, that's—so generally the dealerships were located in Fabens, or—

JS:

Fabens. Fabens and El Paso. Fabens mostly.

RM:

I wonder if you could tell me how that worked, if you could trade in your horses or mules as say, a down payment, and finance the rest, or just how the deal was to get a tractor.

JS:

No, at the time I don't know what the devil we did with horses and mules, I forgot now. But it wasn't—you just paid—at the time I guess the tractor was so cheap farmers could afford to pay for the—cash pay for them. I know that's what my father did, I think he paid cash for all his tractors. Yeah, I mean they was really cheap, a quarter of the price of a cotton—the difference. Now, there's a difference between what the cotton brings and what you have to pay for the tractors are way out of line. Best I can remember, those early tractors sold for about fifteen hundred dollars, two thousand. Then the John Deere came in there. John Deere, we called a Johnny Popper two cylinder. They was easy to overhaul and farmers overhauled them themselves, and they didn't go over until the bank, the control of the bank started weakening from the dealer in Farmall. That John Deere built up, only took them a long time to build up, but they're the leading tractor in this valley right now.

RM:

Um-hm. This gradual change from the Farmall or International Harvester tractor to the John Deere tractor, say by the 1960s most people had John Deere tractors? Is that correct?

JS:

Well that was '50 now, best I can remember, but lately, seventies, you could say the John Deere had most of the tractors in the valley. And also the pickers. The only two—well there was three pickers—there was four pickers at one time. And John Deere and the International is the only one left right now. They had—_____ [?] [00:20:30] had a picker. There might a few be left around the junkyard, around the farm junkyard. Then they had a bunch of—oh for goodness sakes, I forgot the—that blue picker. You don't remember the name of that, do you?

RM:

No, I sure don't. Not that one. Strippers I'm a little familiar with, pickers are—

JS:

The name was—anyway, this picker I'm talking about, there's quite a few of them because it was cheap. And it was just a little different from John Deere and International. John Deere and International are the same basic principal. Got a spindle to take it off the stalk, and you've got a

doffer to take it off the spindle. And this model, I'll be doggone. Can't think of the name of that picker. Anyway, it went out of business, it wasn't too good.

RM:

When did the first pickers come in? Do you recall when you got your first, or used your first picker?

JS:

Yeah, 1960 or '61, '60. And see these tractors were kind of an experiment in different kind of pickers. They came over here a few years before they developed the one they've got right now, and they had different—they had hooks on them and different types, until they finally settled on the spindle and the doffer.

RM:

Prior to that time you all used hand labor to pick the cotton.

JS:

Hand labor to pick it, yeah, that's when we had the Braceros.

RM:

Say where you ever a member of the El Paso Valley Cotton Association?

JS:

Oh yeah. Yeah, I've been a member ever since I started farming. I still am.

RM:

Um-hm. Was part of that organizations goal, was that to handle the Braceros? Or make arrangements for the Braceros?

JS:

That's right. Yeah, they was the one to handle the Braceros, we got it through them, through the El Paso Valley Cotton Association.

RM:

Was that the reason that the El Paso Valley Cotton Association formed, was for the Bracero program?

JS:

Well, part of the reason, because we—that was the biggest reason, yes. But now since—well this

was before they—we get our fertilizer through them. Fertilizer and insecticide and all the chemicals through the Cotton Association.

RM:

It's since become a cooperative, that would market the goods like the chemicals you need to farm.

JS:

Right.

RM:

Okay. When y'all first went to using tractors, I wonder what effect that had on the types of crops you raised, or the acreage you devoted to crops. Did y'all cut out that one third feed?

JS:

Yeah. That's true, they sure did. That's where—cut out that rotating business and yields went down. Because we didn't rotate it enough, and it looked like we hadn't had, for most of the farmers—some of the farmers, the was financially strapped, they tried to make as much money as they could off their cotton yield, especially since rent business. All the renters in there for as much is you can out of a farm, and not put too much back into it.

RM:

Was there a high degree of renting, or tenant farming here in the valley?

JS:

No, not too much. Not too much. What it is, it is right now because the simple reason, lots of these farms getting subdivided, ten, fifteen acres, and quite a few—well the people that own ten, fifteen, acres, he can't afford to buy more equipment, so he just lease it out. And lots of these farmers got I don't know how many places—ten, fifteen places leased, you know the small acreage.

RM:

The price for land has been driven up by the development? Is that correct? And it's—

JS:

It sure has. And it's been way out of sight that you can pay out of the profit from a farm. It used to be—well I guess this was all over the United States—it used to be if you can't pay for farming ten years, don't buy it. That was the same from all over the United States. But since this inflation, all that old saying, it all went down the river. Because this land, I imagine it costs you about twenty-five hundred dollars an acre for good land right now. And you couldn't pay for it,

the crop that you made being hard to pay for it. I don't know how many years, I can't even guess how many years. Simple reason, high income tax. If you make any money, why they tax the heck out of you. So, you're stuck. You do—you cannot pay for it out of what you make from the land, unless you discover oil on it. [Laughter]

RM:

And there's no oil so far in the Valley.

JS:

So far it's been dry land.

RM:

Although I noticed they were drilling down in Hudspeth County a while back.

JS:

Yeah. Of course—

[Pause in recording]

RM:

All right, we were talking about I guess how farming's evolving in the valley, and the price of land has gotten to be so much that it's—

JS:

Out of sight.

RM:

Difficult. Is farm land tending to concentrate then in the hands of a few people, and the small farmer—

JS:

No, in this particular valley it's getting subdivided. Five, ten, acre blocks. And, no, I don't think there's any farms getting any bigger.

RM:

And here's another question too since the city seems to be growing down the valley. Do you think in the future that all the farming will tend to gravitate towards Hudspeth County? In that region?

JS:

Yes, it will, yes it will. In fact the El Paso District's trying to do something about annexing part of the Hudspeth County, in the valley anyway. It should go down there, because the way this setup, with the government land, that water's got to be put to use, some kind of use, I mean beneficial use, in other words you've got to put it on farmland. Well then you build a house on it. I think that's the law, conservation law, reclamation law.

RM:

Okay, we're about at the end of this. I'm going to turn it over to the other side, then ask some questions there.

[Pause in recording]

RM:

—before, but I was interested in Pima cotton and when that came into use here.

JS:

During the Korean War, when the president was—President Truman was the president. There was a shortage of they were afraid of—well let's see, at the time they used Pima cotton all for various war supplies, I don't know what kind of war supplies, and tires and this and that. And they was afraid we were going to get cut off from importing that stuff. And that's when they started raising that real big, they started raising the Pima cotton way back in the—when was it? Some place in the forties, I can't remember.

Unknown Person (UP):

About when we came to Pima, we had Pima in '41, that's when we got that Studebaker by having fifty acres of Pima.

JS:

Yeah, that's when we started raising it, '40, '41 right there. And first it was called SXP, short X crossed with a Pima. And it started in Arizona and naturally it spread down to this part of Texas and New Mexico. And the first year we planted it, we didn't know how to raise it, we just irrigated it like we did the short upland cotton, and it grew several feet tall, and it put out too much fruit. We had to call Arizona, find out how to raise it, they said haul the water off of it, and burn it. But meanwhile they had developed a different kind of strain from SXP number—well they're up to number six now.

RM:

Let me ask you this. So the cultivation practices with Pima cotton different than they would be with the other cottons?

JS:

No, it's the same, except in irrigation. We used to put maybe one or even two irrigation less on Pima than we did on Upland cotton. Now seem like since they developed this new type, seems like we irrigated the Pima about as much as we do with the Upland.

RM:

Is there any way to determine how much water that y'all apply to cotton during the growing season?

JS:

Oh, we know that when it starts burning at hot spots, we irrigate it. In fact we got weak spots in a field, sandy spot, and when they start burning why it's time to irrigate the rest of it. I imagine it—well they probably imagined it up here at the A&M station farm, they can tell you exactly what you need, but farmers don't pay too much attention to that.

RM:

Would you irrigate, say, four times during a growing season?

JS:

Yeah, four to five times.

RM:

Does that include the pre-plant irrigation?

JS:

Right. Right, we—it all depends on how hot the season is, how hot they weather they get, and how much rain we get. Sometimes we get enough rain, you don't have to irrigate.

RM:

Say, do you have some farmland in Arizona?

JS:

Yeah, yes I did, I had some farmland over there. Elfrida, Arizona.

RM:

I'm unfamiliar with where that's located. What part of the state?

JS:

Douglas, about twenty miles north of Douglas, in what they call Sulfur Springs Valley. And they had real good water out there.

RM:

Groundwater?

JS:

Groundwater, yes. But this elevation is about forty three hundred feet. It's right on the line with the frost danger—frost hit early sometimes. Especially farther north you go, you go right on the line right there on Elfrida, and you go up in Wilcox, Wilcox around about fifty, sixty miles away up there, it's even a little cooler up there.

RM:

Did you acquire this land after World War II?

JS:

No. No, we got—well, I worked for my father in 1930 and got out of the Marine Corps. About five, six years I got about forty, fifty acres off of him. And then I bought the adjoining seventy acres right here at Tornillo from my neighbor in 1939 or '40, some place in the early—and I got Hudspeth County land after the—down at Esperanza. And in the forties, the later forties, then I got this Arizona land in the fifties.

RM:

I guess that's what I was interested in is what prompted you to acquire some land in Arizona?

JS:

Well, a friend of mine, a friend of mine was over there and he was farming out of here. Then he went over to farm over in Arizona, and he told me through Anderson Clayton, there's a good quarter section of land for sale, good land at a cheap price. That's the reason I acquired it.

RM:

Where the wells already there, did you have to have those drilled?

JS:

Yes, yes, wells were already there. You had to—those wells out there they sanded up where you had to go in there and clean them out every four or five, few years anyways.

RM:

By sand primarily?

JS:

Yes, by sand. Blowing the sand out.

RM:

What kind of fuel operated those pumps in Arizona?

JS:

We was on electricity out there.

RM:

Electricity? Rural electric cooperative?

JS:

Yeah. Electric cooperative out of Wilcox. I forgot the name of it. Biggest, it's a big electric co-op and they own a part of that eastern Arizona.

RM:

So the electric lines were already in place, all you had to do was acquire the pumps and get them hooked up and get the wells drilled.

JS:

Oh, no this was already in cultivation. The land I bought in Arizona, it already had wells and electric lines and everything. [Pause] Then later on I bought some land over at Dell City. And I farmed that for, oh, sixteen years. And it finally decided to get out. I sold it, because it was hard, hard to make any money out of all that on the land over at Dell City, it's—well the price of fuel kept going up, and it's—it was hard to make any money on it, let's put it that way. Couldn't make a profit, so I decided to sell it. Got out.

RM:

That's also groundwater, irrigated land at Dell City.

JS:

Yeah, that's also pump water.

RM:

Pump water?

JS:

Yes, it's all pump water.

RM:

What part of the valley was your land located in in Dell City?

JS:

It was a mile due west from Dell City.

RM:

How deep was the water there?

JS:

The water was—pumping level was about 135 feet when you started pumping in the spring. By the time you quit pumping in August, last part of August I think we was down two hundred feet. But in the spring it came back to 135, so it was—climate was getting charged again, it wasn't a sheet of water, it was running water, put it that way.

RM:

Okay. How would you compare Dell City in the methods you needed to use there, the availability of water, with your farm in Arizona?

JS:

About the same. Except I didn't farm the Arizona farm long enough to know if the water level wasn't kept on going down like it did the Pecos. Now the Pecos, they started pumping water hundred and fifty feet, and I got a brother down there, when he quit pumping he was pumping six hundred feet. In other words, it was sheet water. When you pump it out, you didn't get any recharge. Think that's what's happening over the plains, isn't it?

RM:

Yeah, right, it's very little recharge, so once they take that water out it's gone, it's gone for good.

JS:

You can go down to the Pecos, and sort of make you feel sad to see all those farms going back to brush, not getting cultivated.

RM:

What prompted you to quit farming in Arizona?

JS:

Oh, I gave up farming to my son-in-law and daughter, and he was a college boy, and he couldn't make a go of it so they just lost it.

RM:

That seems like a lot of travel to farm here in the valley, to farm in Dell City and to farm in Arizona.

JS:

That was in my younger days. See, I had airplanes. I started over here at this farm, came out, and then I jumped over to Arizona. Next day I jumped from Arizona to Dell City, and from Dell City I jumped down to Esperanza, then I finally wound up home. Sometimes I made it in one day if the weather was good.

RM:

A complete round?

JS:

A complete round, yeah. When you're young, you can do lots of work.

RM:

When you acquired that land at Dell City, was that already in cultivation too?

JS:

Yeah. Biggest part of it was in cultivation. They just was—they'd been in cultivation about a year when we got it. Me and my partner, had old Charlie Prentis for my partner, and we farmed together a few years and then we split our partnership later on. I went out on my own.

RM:

And his name, your partner's name again was?

JS:

Charlie Prentis. Charles—

RM:

Prentis?

JS:

Prentis.

RM:

Did you raise cotton primarily in Dell City, and also at Arizona?

JS:

That's right. I raised cotton and I raised the castor beans at one time, a couple years. And we had a castor bean mill, two of them in the United States. One of them was at Los Angeles, and that was at East Coast. And we had to haul those castor beans from Dell City to California, Los Angeles, to mill. And the only way we could come out of it, we got a truck on the back haul,

they hauled something else, some over here and the back haul, it would only cost us half as much as you would direct cost. Because direct cost, it wouldn't pay to haul it over there. And see what made me quit raising that castor beans over to Dell City, we got flooded in 1966, and it washed all that gravel down in that castor bean rock. And the mill penalized me for having rock in that damn _____ [?] [00:45:02], in the bean. So, I seen it wasn't profitable, so I quit raising it. But anyway, we had those castor beans, they keep coming up wild. And we had castor beans on there for three or four years after that, volunteer.

RM:

I guess we might look at the use of herbicides and pesticides. When you began using them? When they came on the market?

JS:

Well, yeah, they came on the market, right. In fact we—down in this valley over here you got so much grass and weeds, so much seed growing on the ditch banks, canals, the river, you couldn't farm without a herbicide. You couldn't farm, because it'd cost you more than the crop would to keep it clean, keep the weeds and grass out of it. We had water grass pretty bad. We had insecticide, and when it first came on the market, as a matter of fact it was so doggone cheap that we went on a schedule and hit them every seven days. And at the time we was ignorant, we didn't know we was killing the wild Beneficial's. But since then, why we got these agronomic stations that are looking into this, and we've got pest management association and scouts. We only poison when we have to, and we hope we don't have to poison maybe once or twice, because we try to keep Beneficial's out in the fields as long as we can.

RM:

Um-hm. What type of insect problems do you have? What are the types of—

JS:

Bollworm mostly, bollworm, and we got some tobacco budworm, then we got some pink bollworm. Now the pink bollworm don't hit until August. And I think we got us a blower that blowed across the field at night when the pink bollworm moths were flying. We try to control the moth instead of the pink bollworm, because you can't—once a pink bollworm gets in a boll there's no way in the world you can kill it. So you try to control the pinkies moth, and we found out they fly at night, so we try to spray across the field at night then seem like we got a pretty good control last year. So we only had one or two sprayers in the valley, but this year we got quite a few more. It seem like each farm we got them a sprayer, got somebody to spray for them. That's for the pink bollworm. Then we got a—naturally when you irrigated you wet your _____ [inaudible] [00:48:22] why you had an airplane, we got a Perkins Aero Service up near Fabens that does the biggest part of our spray.

RM:

Do y'all import insects, beneficial insects?

JS:

Yeah, we tried ____grama [?][00:48:47], and it keeps them down but not enough to—not to use poison. In other words we have to use so many, so heavy, it get to be too expensive.

RM:

Did y'all begin using chemicals in the late 1950s? Early 1960s? What was the—

JS:

Yeah, when it first came out. Use that thing like it was a DDT looking like—you got like it was a fly or something. And I think that's where we played the devil, I think we killed all our beneficials and the worm got worse. And the worm got—

RM:

Resistance?

JS:

Resistant. We first this—we started using this ____ [inaudible] [00:50:00] I started using a pint per acre. Did a good job. Then it got resistant, we jumped to two pints. And finally jumped to about a quarter and half. And it still wouldn't kill them, so we just quit [00:50:17]. A quart and a half of the ____ [inaudible] [00:50:23] it killed all the beneficials.

RM:

Um-hm. Were the herbicides something that came on the market a little bit later than the insecticides?

JS:

Yeah, I bought, oh I think some—I don't remember but I guess about the same time. Yeah, it did come up, insecticide came in first, then herbicide later.

RM:

And now they're pretty well an integral part of farming here in the valley, both insecticides and herbicides.

JS:

Yeah. Of course we got a farmer too that doesn't use insecticides or herbicides. They've got a system a-going, and we've been trying to find a system, we haven't found it yet, how to get by without a herbicide.

RM:

These would be generally a small farming operation?

JS:

No, it's pretty—a couple good size farm. But it's finally—weeds finally getting them. Might take a few years to get to them, but it'll get to them sooner or later.

RM:

Okay, I notice that people seem to be moving away from cotton, they don't raise as much cotton as they did before, and they substitute other crops, like peppers. For that, when did that change begin to occur?

JS:

Oh, it started quite a—once these new farmers start, third generation started farming, they started looking around to see if they can raise a higher price crop. Because at the time, government had restriction on allotments on the cotton, so they started looking around for other crops. That's—pay more than cotton would, because that—expenses on cotton got so high, you cannot make too much—you don't make enough money to pay off all your obligation. In other words, you got to make a good crop each year, and you don't do it—the weather keeps you farming, so it's a gamble. Now if you can raise peppers, chili peppers or onions, or—hit the market. Lettuce or tomatoes, you've got to hit the market. In other words, we're a little late to compete with the rain grown stuff over in the east. Because our weather, compared to theirs, we get the late frost. We can't compete with the California because they're earlier than we are. Now they raise—differently—I've seen every kind of a vegetables raised in this country that I can think of: tomatoes, lettuce, sweet potatoes, cabbage, onions, chili pepper, oh, anything—you can grow anything that's in line that you can grow anyplace else in here. But finding a market for it. Also the grapes. Grapes are the one time there's a big grape country before the Elephant Butte got started, back when the Spaniards came in. You do not have a market, it's doggone far to markets. So, that leaves us a basic crop is cotton. And let's see—the people went into raising pecans. Pecans' a big crop now, but it takes about ten years before it pays off. So, you can't have too much of a farm in pecans, because you've got to make a living. Meanwhile, they're growing up. And also, the pecans been planted all over the southern part of the United States, and the supply's getting more than the demand and the price of a pecan went way down from what it used to be.

RM:

Was there a greenhouse operation that used to raise tomatoes over here?

JS:

Oh yeah, they got about a dozen greenhouses out here right around here not too far. But they're

along about Buttes. But every one of them went out of operation. Those tomatoes raised in there, they just didn't taste right, didn't taste like tomatoes. So people quit buying them, couldn't market them, and anybody wants to buy a cheap greenhouse there's a bunch of them over there for sale I imagine.

RM:

Is that right. When was that in operation, that greenhouse?

JS:

About five years ago I guess, best I can remember. It went big for a while, I mean big.

RM:

Is it hydroponics?

JS:

Yeah, hydroponic, yeah.

RM:

They raising it without soil?

JS:

Without soil, but they just didn't taste right, and people quit buying them. No market.

RM:

When y'all get your cotton ginned, I was wondering when you got it delinted, the cotton seed delinted.

JS:

Oh, you take it to the delinting plant. You can get it after ginning season's over, he starts delinting about the first of January. Then he delints it right along, and you start planting cotton the last part of March if the weather's right, or early part of April. And he's got to have all that cotton delinted by then.

RM:

Who is this that's delinting the cotton?

JS:

Fabens Delinting Plant.

RM:

Do they use dry gas? Hydrochloric acid gas? Or is it wet sulfur?

JS:

I think it's hydrochloric gas, because—well see that's the second generation of delinting plant operator. Jimmy Etheredge is operating now. His daddy basically started this delinting plant. When he had a oil mill operating in Tornillo, some farmers had it delinted, saw delinted in the oil mill plant. But it doesn't work as good as you can get it acid delinted.

RM:

The saws scour the coating on the seed?

JS:

Yeah, sometime, it's supposed to take all the fuzz off it, and well anyway, the cotton oil went—I mean, yeah. The mill went out of business, took all of the equipment out of it, that stopped it right there. Because it was much cheaper than it was by acid delinting, naturally.

RM:

Well that's the only delinting operation is that one at Fabens?

JS:

Yeah, that Fabens in the lower valley, and then got one up the valley. One or two up there, I don't know, probably got one of them left.

RM:

Do you have to get pima—

[Pause in recording]

RM:

—your cotton oil just a little bit. How it was founded and then why it went out of business.

JS:

The reason it was founded, Anderson Clayton had a mill over there, and they wasn't paying these farmers too much for the seed. So, these farmers got mad at Anderson Clayton, organized their own organization to build an oil mill, and some of them even helped build it down over there.

RM:

Um-hm. This was during the 1930s?

JS:

Oh, way back there, yeah.

RM:

Was Anderson Clayton's oil mill, was that in El Paso?

JS:

Let's see. Yeah, it was in El Paso, right.

RM:

The cotton oil mill at Tornillo, that was pretty much a cooperative venture.

JS:

Right, it was, yes. Yeah, and they've got—after they got it going they got the market price for their seed. They got to stay competitive for quite a few years, and they finally, after this cotton allotment came in, they couldn't get enough seed to keep it operating. So, they sold out to the SWIG—that's another cooperative

RM:

That's Southwestern Irrigated Growers.

JS:

Right. Meanwhile, the Anderson Clayton pulled out of here. Oh, I can't remember how many years ago. They pulled out of here, and they closed on the mill. [inaudible][01:01:53] And SWIG got all of the seed. They were some farmers that didn't like the seed, they might have—one or two farmers sent the seed clear to Deming, New Mexico, that's where the next oil mill is.

RM:

Um-hm. Generally when Tornillo Cotton Oil was in operation, what kind of territory did they dray cotton seed in from?

JS:

Just from the lower valley.

RM:

Any from Pecos or that country?

JS:

No, no. No, just down here. You know at the time they was growing they didn't have too good of a transportation system. It probably the freight was pretty high to get it in from Pecos. We did—

we got some cotton from the Van Horn that was ginned over here, and we got the seed off it. But that was seed cotton over there in—

RM:

Yeah. And then the oil was marketed? Did y'all sell cotton seed meal as well—

JS:

Yes.

RM:

—To some of these feed lots?

JS:

Feed lots and cow men, and they sent the oil to whoever bought the oil from them. Whoever use oil. And they had another cotton oil mill at the Fabens, also privately owned. He went out of business too after when the cotton allotment came in there was not enough cotton seed to operate them. They sold out. Anderson Clayton closed up. We only got one mill left now, it's up at SWIG. And since this PIK [**Payment-in-Kind**] came in there, they didn't get enough seed to open the mill up, they just sold the seed out to a dairy in Mexico. They didn't grind any oil at all.

RM:

In this past year?

JS:

This past year, yeah. Yeah, PIK cut production way down.

RM:

You know there's one theme that comes up again and again, and that's the government interference in agricultural industry. And it seems like it's driven some of the smaller gins out of business, and the cotton allotments also had an effect on the cotton oil company here. I was wondering what your opinion is on the government's involvement in agriculture?

JS:

Well, when they put the minimum wage law in effect, you got to have them in there. Because if they're going to have a free market, well then going to have to knock off a minimum wage out of the business, which will not be done, so there's no way in the world you'll get any labor if you don't let that that minimum wage get knocked out. That means the government's going to be in that damned cotton business from now on.

RM:

Do you think that the role of the government has been beneficial over the years or detrimental to the cotton industry here in the valley?

JS:

Oh, it's been beneficial. Well you can't—we can't compete with these people, they're paying their laborers a dollar a day or less than a dollar a day, and to compete in the world market. Well we have to pay the minimum wage on it, because that's the biggest expense, the damned labor.

RM:

Well is a lot of the cotton raised here raised for export?

JS:

I think so yeah, most of this, especially this long staple cotton is exported. In other words we got to have an export to stay in business, if we're going to—if not, why, the government's going to have to step in and really put the limits on how much cotton could be raised.

RM:

Are there any textile mills or other types of manufacturing processes here in the El Paso area that uses El Paso cotton?

JS:

We had a textile mill in El Paso at one time, and tried to use this local cotton. They evidently couldn't compete with the mills over in the east. They went out of business. But one textile mill.

RM:

This was back—

JS:

Oh, about thirty, forty years ago.

RM:

Okay, quite a while.

JS:

Quite a while, yes.

RM:

Was it a cooperative enterprise, or—

JS:

No it wasn't, it was private.

RM:

[Pause] So I guess really the only manufacturing that makes use of local product is the SWIG, the cotton oil mill there.

JS:

[Coughs] Right, they're the one that grind the seed, and they send oil to the factories and sell their meal and cake to the feedlots, cattle ranches. There sure just wasn't enough to grind so they sold—you know the—you can feed—if it's feeding, cotton seed oil, can feed cotton seed oil to cattle now. And heck, when I was a kid they thought that would kill a cow, they wouldn't let you feed them, but they found out different. [Coughs] So they feed it to cows. Evidently they keep [inaudible] [01:08:49] to regulate the amount they can eat.

RM:

Also I guess it's the gossypol gland that puts out the harmful, or the toxic chemical?

JS:

[Coughs] Yeah. I thought that's what kept the cattle from—

[Pause in recording]

JS:

As much as they thought of it, I don't know. But anyway, they're feeding the cotton seed to the cows now.

RM:

It's a high protein material, plus the ruminants, animals that are ruminants I don't think suffer the ill effects that, say, you and I would if we ate the raw cotton. Is there, with the city of El Paso growing, is there competition for water between the farmers in the lower valley and the city of El Paso?

JS:

Well, they—yes there is. The city, they can buy so much water off a district, so many acres. Water rights. And after that, there's a limit on what they can buy, that's an agreement that the Bureau of Reclamation made, way back there sometime. But the city can't depend on water for the simple reason, sometimes that lake went practically dry, Elephant Butte went practically dry, it wasn't twenty-five, thirty thousand acre feet of water left. Well, they're not like a farmer, they

can't farm away from them [?][01:10:49], they've got to have water right there. They can't rely on water out a river, 100 percent. They got to have wells to supplement.

RM:

You had talked before about the—well, now here's the question too, a follow up to that other one. Will there come a time when the city will supplant the farming operations here, simply because there will be more people, a greater demand on the water resources?

JS:

Oh yes. You know, the people come first, the people come before farms, so eventually if it's big enough now it probably to use all the water coming out. But like I say, if they would get a drought on that watershed, Elephant Butte water shed, there's be no water in the lake. And it cannot depend on it.

RM:

Back during the drouth in the 1950s, was there any attempts to use groundwater here in the valley?

JS:

Oh yeah, yeah. We drilled down in the lower valley, we drilled about six hundred wells. In fact, I've got six—I drilled about eight of nine wells myself on six hundred acres.

RM:

Is that water deep? That groundwater deep?

JS:

No, no. The deeper it is, the saltier it get. Most of that water within a hundred feet, beyond a hundred feet it gets salty.

RM:

Was it the drouth that prompted you to put in those groundwater—

JS:

Correct. Oh yeah.

RM:

Wells?

JS:

Yeah, if you're going to stay in the business, stay in the farming business.

RM:

You've got to do it.

JS:

Yeah, we spent quite a lot of money on digging those wells, of course, we didn't know what the heck it was all about—some of them drillers put it over us.

RM:

The drillers, where were they from?

JS:

From plains, most of them.

RM:

Oh, they came down here to drill wells?

JS:

Yeah.

RM:

Did you operate those—what kind of energy did you use to operate those pumps?

JS:

Just a car engine converted into a—car and truck engine converted to run on butane. It can take any car, pickup engine and run a butane system on it. But that was—butane was five cents a gallon. Right now it's seventy-six cents a gallon. And some of these—let's see from Clint—from Fabens on toward El Paso, some of them farmers got natural gas. Natural gas went through their farms. And some of them had diesel engines on them. The majority of them are butane.

RM:

Was there a butane dealer in Tornillo? Fabens, or—

JS:

Yeah.

RM:

Where was it located?

JS:

I think we had two of them in Tornillo. And two or three at Fabens. Every little town had a

bunch of them butane dealers. Now we wound up with one in Fabens, one in Clint, and one in El Paso. Because lots of these cars and pickups getting converted into butane, commercial. It's a cheaper gasoline, like I said, seventy six cents wholesale, I don't know, plus about eighty, ninety cents retail, well it keeps your engine clean. And it's easier in the wintertime, it starts easier, run easier.

RM:

Okay. I guess might look at the varieties of cotton that are being grown here in the valley at this time, at the present time.

JS:

Present time? Okay. We had the stripper cotton a couple two or three years ago, found out our gins didn't have the capacity to clean it good enough, and we didn't get a good enough grade, so we started looking for a picker cotton. We think we finally got it, it's a DP&L 90, a picker cotton developed for the San Joaquin Valley, and we are about the same climate as they are. And it did good for about two to three years. Now we hope it stays that way because that long staple and the stripper, better grades and you can naturally [inaudible] [01:16:58] long staple, better grades you can make more money than stripper. But then [inaudible] [01:17:03] stripper cotton left, some people, they just want to keep their hand at it. SB21. Micronaire, 220, 235.

RM:

Those were the stripper?

JS:

Those were the stripper cotton. Now micronaires, you can either pick or strip it. But the SB21, probably about a hundred acres of it over in the valley as far as I know. It cannot be picked, it's got to be stripped. And the biggest part of it is the Delta 590. And I think all of our pima, see last year there wasn't enough seed to go around for S6. But this year I think all of our pima, I'd say about 95 percent is S6. Which is about—supposed to be about ten days earlier than the S5 which we had a last year, quite a bit of it last year.

RM:

Has the climate changed in this area over the time you've been involved in farming? I guess the last sixty years.

JS:

Uh-huh. Now seems to me like we used to get quite a bit of rain in April and May when I was a kid growing up, because we had mules and every time it would rain we had to get them housed, and you couldn't have cotton the way it was planted, you had to crosshair it. Seemed like I did

lots of crosshairing back in them days that we don't do now. So it seems like we don't get as much rain in the spring as we used to, that's about all the difference I can see.

RM:

The seasons still is about the same average length?

JS:

Right. Except the cotton we had a [inaudible] [01:19:25], I mean Acala cotton, we had in early days it seemed like it—oh, before land got bad [?], seemed like the cotton—we used to start picking, when we had hand pickers, we used to start picking twenty-four, twenty-five day out, twenty-fifth day of August. By the twenty-fifth of September we was at full swing. Now we don't even start at the twenty-fifth of September. Evidently, cotton doesn't open as fast as it used to, and I don't know why, can't figure it out.

RM:

Well and too in the early days you went over the field several times—

JS:

Oh yeah, we're picking—how many times—that's right. I think I already got that earlier. That's about the only difference in climate, I can't—it seems to me like climate change over at Dell City, we started farming over there in 1950, and it was so hot in August, September, that you couldn't have any cover on it [?] [01:20:45]—sixteen, seventeen years later when I quit over there, seemed like they had to use blankets in August, seemed like it got colder earlier. But then that's—well that's about eighty, ninety miles away from here. It's down in a hole ____ [01:21:15] all around it. It's altogether different from this irrigated cotton here.

RM:

Well did the farming experience here help you Dell City, or did you have to learn a lot of new tricks for—

JS:

Had to learn lots of new tricks over in Dell City. Not to depend on the rain. First time we had a big head of rain over there, I shut off the pumps. And when the rain dried out, every acre of that thing started burning and I couldn't get around there with the pumps fast enough. So from then on, even if it did rain, why I just kept those pumps a going.

RM:

Did it take more water in Dell City than it took here to raise crop?

JS:

No, I think it did. Cotton takes so much water and that's it.

RM:

Besides the rain, were there any other new tricks you had to learn in Dell City?

JS:

Yes, we had—well when we first went over there we had to use a lister planter like they do in the plains, plant it down there in a hole. Okay, if it comes to rain, it washes all of that down into the furrow of the cotton, it buried it. You had to replant it. If not, well you'd go in there and break that crust. My cotton kept staying green to way late, and I didn't use no fertilizer. And after I left over there and went and tested the water, that water had nitrogen in it.

RM:

A natural fertilizer.

JS:

Natural fertilizer, and that's what kept that cotton green way into the—where it should have been maturing out. Didn't find out until I quit.

RM:

Okay. Here you mentioned the lister planter planting down in the furrow at Dell City. Here in the lower valley y'all have always planted on top of the bed.

JS:

Top of the bed, uh-huh. Yeah, we used to, when we were picking with hands, we used to plant a flat planting, because the hands can get it no matter how low the bottom boll was. But now if we use machines we've got to plant it on a bed so the machine can get down under them low bolls, pick them up.

RM:

Let's see. They tried to plant what they called narrow row cotton up on the Plains.

JS:

Yeah, they—

RM:

Or broadcast cotton.

JS:

Broadcast—we tried everything down here. We had a farmer or two broadcasting down here in Hudspeth County, and they had to make them a stripper, at the time they didn't have the—they didn't make those strippers. And they all went back to the standard rows. None of it paid off. In fact, we had a farmer—an efficient farm over there, down to twenty-seven inch rows down here at the [inaudible] [01:25:17]. And they claim they made a—I don't know—lots more cotton they did on a forty-inch row, but I noticed this year they went back to a forty inch row. If they ended up making so much more cotton and money on a twenty-seven inch row, they'd stay on it. So evidently it does not pay.

RM:

The forty-inch row is the standard row width here?

JS:

Standard row width here. The majority of them got forty, a few of them got thirty inch. And all of that no-till farming, we tried it out when the Caterpillar first came, Caterpillar came out about the same time the rubber tires did on tractors. Well the first farmers over here, Willie Henderson, had a Caterpillar. When those first Caterpillars come out, those three cylinder Caterpillars. He tried out a minimum tillage, you know, just disked the doggone thing and listed. I mean disked the son of a gun, disked it and chiseled it, that's all. And I noticed—he did too—the cotton grew about this size, and [inaudible] [01:26:47] cotton was about six to ten inches higher, so he went back to the standard tillage. Well his neighbor, Schaeffer, Spec Schaeffer, he tried it one year. He's back to the forty inch row. Now this is about thirty years ago that I'm talking about. And another friend of mine named Mike Moore, he went the same thing. He chiseled it, disked it and put it up on rows at the same time, minimum tillage, one time through there. He's back on a forty inch row. So, minimum tillage has been tried in this country thirty or forty years ago. And it always been back to standard tillage. Standard rows.

RM:

What's it take to be a farmer nowadays? What kind of qualities and characteristics do you need? Besides money?

JS:

Yeah. Well, you got to know your—you got to know how to—it's pretty hard to answer. Well the best thing to do is just watch, if your neighbor's a good farmer, watch what he does, do exactly what he do, until you learn yourself. You know in planting, you're not—well wait until your neighbor starts planting. And you have to have, well, a fellow's got the common sense to see what the heck his neighbor's doing, you just go ahead and do like he does, water the cotton, you've got to watch your cotton, don't let it burn. And well, all the same crops, I just don't know how to describe what the heck it takes to be a farmer. [Laughter]

RM:

Well that's all right. Are you pessimistic or optimistic regarding farming here in the Valley in the future?

JS:

Oh, I'm optimistic, hell—

[Pause in recording]

RM:

—Activity?

JS:

All the lands going to be up there all the time. The land's the only renewable—

RM:

Resource.

JS:

Resource that we got. Everything else we've got—well, the timbers, stuff like that, but then the oil and mineral and everything else, once you use them, they're gone. In other words, land is what keeps us going. And this soil conservation's doing all they can to preserve that land and keep it from being washing into the oceans.

RM:

Um-hm. So what are some of the conservation techniques that are used here in the Lower Valley?

JS:

Well we are levelling our land, cementing the ditches. That's the two main soil conservation practices—cementing the ditches and levelling the land. And oh well, everything else that's got to be done, keeping the drain ditches, well that's the irrigation district. Keeping our drain ditches clean so the water level don't come up there too high. In other words, we've got water flowing in this valley, it's got to be let out of here. Which is the best thing that could happen to it.

RM:

Okay, well I don't have any more questions. Any observations you'd like to make about farming here in the Lower Valley?

JS:

No, I don't. Trying to keep all this land getting into subdivision, trying to keep it in farms, or we're going to say fifty or a hundred years from now we're going to need every acre that we've got. Keep the people in food. Also land should could be took good care of. That's our lifeline, lifeblood or whatever you want to call it.

RM:

Okay. What was your father's name?

JS:

Let's see, he called himself Vance, V-a-n-c-e.

RM:

Okay.

JS:

And like I said before, the reason we over here, why, it's a place he could sleep at night.

[Laughter]

RM:

Cools off pretty good here.

J:

Yeah. [Laughter]

End of recording

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