

Socorro County Historical Society, Oral History Tapes

John L. Greenwald, Sr. interviewed by Sue Little

When did you come to Socorro County? I was born here in 1908. *Your parents? Have they lived here long before then?* Yes, my father came with his father from Ohio, and my grandfather was a millwright - flour mill- and the first mill they built was in Albuquerque. *Why did they come out, John?* They were war products - civil war- both sides of the family and they came out of the deep south. They had everything destroyed at that time. They didn't have anything to go back to so they decided to come west. They came west for their health. My grandfather had tuberculosis, Grandfather Greenwald had tuberculosis, and being a prisoner in camp for so long ---. *A prisoner of the north?* And so was Grandfather Terry. They both had tuberculosis. They came here for their health, and he had to make a living so ----. *How did they come out? They couldn't come by train during the Civil War, could they?* I think they came by riding (trains) most of the way. *And they settled in Albuquerque and then came down to Socorro?* They came to Albuquerque and after a few years there, they had an opportunity to build a mill in Los Lunas and they came down and built a mill --- *Would those be water mills?* I imagine so. I don't know for sure. And then they built one in Belen and he got enough money to build another one in Socorro. *Up until that time they had the water wheels?* Right, right. *Before we talk about the water wheels, how did they light the houses?* Kerosene and candles. *Probably homemade candles.* Yes. *How about the heating?* Firewood and some coal. *Where did they get the coal?* From the mines at Tokay and Carthage. *Do they get coal from there today?* Yes ma'am, there is a large body of coal there. It's too expensive to mine. Someday they will probably pit mine. *Oh, I hope not. Is it against the law to pit mine in New Mexico?* Well, there is several regulations. *Do you believe the land removed by strip mining can be replaced satisfactorily?* At great expense - it will take a long time. In this country it would be very expensive. *Well, I hope the coal doesn't get so low that they have to go to strip mining.* *Have they done any experiments in resodding here in New Mexico?* Yes, the Highway Department has tried it on these superhighways with varied success. It's taken hold in places. *Well, let's get back to the mill. What do you remember about the mill?* *It was built before you were born. What about this mill? How is it operated?* At that time it was powered by steam, and my first memories of the mill are a large poorly lighted house that vibrated. *It's brick, isn't it?* Yes, but there's still immense vibration. *Would that take care of only wheat?* They started grinding in the summer, in July and they ground day and night, every day except Sunday, of course they laid off, but day and night throughout the week until about the first of April. Then they closed down and got ready to start again. *Actually they went the year around.* *Well what was the process there, did the farmers have to help - well someone was talking about the old mills where the farmers had to come in and help and they had some unofficial cooperatives where everybody had to get in and help.* It was a barter and exchange form of commerce. The farmers would bring in their raw wheat and their raw corn and whatever they had to grind and they'd exchange it for the finished product, and of course they milled all different kinds of flour. Today they are not quite so refined? and they also produce corn meal. *How large an area did it serve?* It served as far north as Bernalillo and down to Truth or Consequences. *It was quite a large area.*

And of course it served flour for most of the west side of the state. *Well with this natural food kick we have today, has anyone approached you about reopening? Would that be at all feasible?* I believe that could be reconstituted in about six months or a year. *Everyone is going in for natural food. There's quite a kick all over about that and it wasn't that long ago they were trying to grind their own flour. I just wonder how successful it was. And you think that could be put back in operation?* I was talking to the people that put out the Socorro (----) Bulletin and they are planning a tour of the month to the historical society. They were talking about going down to the old mill. *Is it safe for them to go in? Could they go in?* It isn't lighted. Most of the windows is either destroyed or fallen out. *But with no lights, I think we'll just say no and nobody goes in.* We do carry a high liability insurance on it but still there's no use taking chances. *With no lights it be hard to keep control of them so no inside trips - just outside - and they can hear about it. Did you ever work in the mill?* Well first, my father had me cleaning up - we'd start at the top which is the screening floor - that was the dustiest part of it - I had to clean up the screens. *I bet he didn't pay you by the hour, you were just supposed to do it. After you graduated from sweeping, what did you do?* Well, I showed an interest in what they were doing and he switched jobs - the hardest job we had to do was at time in the bins when the wheat would run into the conveyor it would bridge, and I would have to break those bridges. *And today that would be considered dangerous for a child, wouldn't it?* It wasn't easy to get in it, but I guess some people could have. *All right, what was the next step?* The next step was packing flour and shorts and bran. *What's shorts?* It's flour that doesn't have the regular gluten in it and shorts is used mostly for pickling. *Chutney. But that was packed separately? It's kind of a (---) sort of thing.* Yes, and the pure bran was used for cattle. *I thought people ate bran.* Well, people ate some of it. *Well what was your next step? We'll put you through the mill.* Well, the next step was I had to supervise the outside. *Now what did that involve?* That involved the barter and exchange. *Did you do that?* No, my father did that. If I'd buy wood by the cord and buy something like 500cords every year and they had a big saw at the power plant. My job was to supervise that and also sold coal and building material. *You had quite an operation there.*

I sold to town and Lemitar and we used two teams of horses with a dray wagon. *Do you remember Mr. Cook? The term, dray, seems to be associated with him. And he took everything from the train. He boarded horses and mules. But you had two teams that you serviced. That took lots of lifting didn't it?* Yes, it was a busy time. *It didn't seem to hurt you any - didn't seem o stunt your growth.* No, nothing like that except in reading books - I was an avid reader. Of course, I --- just natural aptitude -- in those days they taught in Spanish half a day in grade school and I had a greater aptitude for Spanish than I did for English. So then Mother taught me at home for about four years and went to the convent one year. *Did boys go to the convent? I didn't know that. And you finished high school here.* Yes. *And by that time, had they stopped the half Spanish?* Yes, Mr. Marcellino was the last teacher I ever had that taught half a day. *Of course, I thin everybody in New Mexico should speak both languages. When did you start acting as a hired person, and not just as the son of a house?* I think he started paying me after I graduated from the eighth grade. He taught me about everything including the bookkeeping an management of the mill and at that time he also kept cattle and he gradually put me out with the cattle. *You were a real cowboy. Well did you go back to*

the mill after that? Did you go to Tech? No, I went to the University of New Mexico and I went down to State College. New Mexico State it is now. What happened to the mill, when did it close? I think it was about in '38 - I wasn't here at the time, and they decided it was cheaper to import than manufacture here and the operators just abandoned the town and after the floods at Silver City wiped out all the farm lands down there (unintelligible) And the floods in '28 and '29- where were you when the floods came? I was here. ---the east side of the river there were cattle in there we got them across the bridge at Socorro (Escondido?) to the bosque between the railroad track and the river in those days --- the cottonwood trees --- and when the floods came we had to build a rowboat to get the cattle out. We herded them out on the highest part -- the hill-- and we lost some cows. But we had to use a rowboat to get around. It was about four feet deep over the whole area. Well, San Marcial has never been rebuilt. No, it never will. The river claimed it. Well you know Mrs. Ben Foster? was in yesterday again - she was talking about '95 when they had a cloudburst and that was before they built the big ditch. Do you remember any cloudbursts? This flood in '28 and '29 that wasn't any cloudburst was it? That was a situation that has arisen several times here in the valley - the river was full of water and then we had heavy rains up on the watershed and it flowed too rapidly and the Rio Puerco and the Rio Salado added to the amount of water in the river --It was too much for the Rio Grande. Do you think that could ever happen again? You don't think we have enough dams to block it? I doubt it. Well, we've had so much snow this winter. The most in years and years. They haven't finished the Cochiti yet. Well the control of the irrigation, what do they call it? Bureau of Reclamation. What was it they started in '32? The Middle Rio Grand Conservancy District. My parents owned some farm land here in the bosque. It really started here in Socorro County, didn't it? You see all those Hatch lands - as far as people ---- in those days I remember they had a dam across the river that they called Bowling Green. That runs where Mrs. Crabtree lives now. That dam is a low dam that was made out of rock and brush - all made by hand and all the ditches were dug and kept in by shovel. Well you know I had a brother come out from Tennessee - he came out to visit- and he kept talking about dry farming - the way he talked about the ditches, I must have known he had no concept about the ditches and the mother ditch and it just started with people digging their own ditches, huh? Now, can you dig your own ditch? Well the ditches that nowadays - well the mother ditch after the rain came, why the Bureau of Reclamation - the Conservancy District - and our ditches are the little ditches ---. And you can dig as many ditches as you want? and use as much water as you want? You can't use as much water as you want, no, no. They allow you about three acre feet. Who measures that? The Bureau of Reclamation. You get so much an acre, is that it? and do they tell you when? Yes. But you can take it any time you want? If the water's there. Lots of years the water's in short supply and then we have to rotate about every 30 days. You have to use it day and night whenever you're entitled to use it. When water's short --- Is it easier at night? There's some evaporation stress there. Who cleans out the (---)? They have a crew and they keep it clean by using power equipment. Now, are they hired by the Conservancy? Yes, ma'am. Who kept up with that, the Committee? Each committee designated a ditch boss, I believe. According to the amount of land that you farmed the number of days that you put in on the ditch or had it hired - you hired somebody to do it. But you were responsible for doing it or paying. Those who didn't fulfill their obligations, no water? Right, that happens once in

a while. They have to pay the fiddler. *And another thing that occurs to me is the wells, the drinking water. Do you have to get a permit for a well.* Yes ma'am, nowadays. Most of the wells when I was a child were hand dug. *And did you ever have a well witcher?* I assume it worked. *What do you think about that?* I've seen it work - I don't know if it was luck by chance but I've seen it indicate where there was water. *A man down in the valley asked me not to use his name said his neighbors had so much difficulty - they'd sink a well and it didn't do any good so he got himself a well witcher is that what you call them?* They call 'em divining rods. There is two types. I've seen both of them work, a peach limb and a book with a key. *Well now that one I've never heard of.* I don't know how they operate that thing. Well the key turns itself on the Bible. You open it to a sacred passage and get a key about four inches long. *Could you or could I hold that Bible, or is it just certain people that it works for?* Well, I didn't try to use it. It was kind of spooky. The man that was operating it, he went barefooted and carried it and that Bible it was a leather-bound Bible and he walked up and down and up and down. *And the key was five inches long? Any particular kind?* Yes, it was a brass key. *Anyhow that's an awfully good story - I never heard of it.* I've seen it, I was maybe five feet away from it. *And he was barefooted? I wonder what the significance of that is?* Well, he claimed he was supposed to get electricity through the key. *Well, it's a good story and it works. Anyway this man in the valley said they were hand digging some wells and he was unhappy and uneasy about it because some of 'em had had a witcher, and he got a witcher and never had any trouble in over twenty years. And he said on the outside, I don't believe in it, but I do. The Bible with a key is really something. Do they still use that?* I don't have any idea. I haven't had the opportunity to be around a water witch, but I've seen it work. As I say, there's two types - one is a peach limb and the other is that key. *It had to be peach, huh?* That's what he said. It was like a wand on the end and he'd hold it. When he found the location the wand would start vibrating and bending down - it'd go right down and touch the ground. *Could that give you any indication how deep the water was? Well it's strange, isn't it.* Well it works. *It works and I've read stories from Maine to California on how it works.* It won't work for everybody. *In fact it works for very few, doesn't it?* That's what I think. *What about well witching as a profession, I wonder if you could make a living.* I knew a water witch - here in Socorro there was one. We're talking about water witching. There was a water witch in Truth or Consequences or Hot Springs. He was the one that worked with a key. *In the Bible, an open Bible and a brass key. There's two systems of water witching. With a key? I hadn't heard of that.* The key would turn on the Bible when the Bible was that thick. *And there's always water there, good water. You have to go deep, huh?* There's surface water on the east side. There's water on the west side at 300 feet, but on the east side it's shallow. It's a small amount. *What about that underground river that is supposed to go overin there. Do you know anything about that? I've heard of it, but nobody seems to know exactly where it is. It comes from way up north in the state and comes out down by Pie Town. Do you know anything about that?* I don't know about an underground river, but I think there's a spring or something. At the Wye Ranch the other side of Horse Springs there's a well there, and you can get a lot of water. *It blows air, and you can hear the water of it. Well, does that have anything to do with the spring up in the hills? Many people think the spring here ties in with an underground river.* Well, it ties in with a good source of water. That spring pops out in Nogal Canyon - it's the same water. And

undoubtedly the Evergreen is the same thing. And at Marvin Ake's the same water. Mr. (---) when he was mining manganese up there he run into vast amounts of water. *Now, are there caves in that section? You know they say from Carlsbad north the whole east section of the state is interlaced with caves and some of the caves may be larger than Carlsbad. And does that go into the section north of Socorro at all?* No. I think the Rio Grande cuts that off. Those caves extend clear into Texas. *I've heard that, but they are not in the western part. Whenever I'd call, father would always connect it with earthquakes in Mexico City. Every time I would go they would have an earthquake in there. They had a big one yesterday. It seems it was 300 miles north of Mexico City. There was no loss of life, but I guess it was pretty bad.* Well the houses that have adobe construction, their structure - they have earthquakes. And Mexico City is built on an old fault. *Well now this fault here - when was it, the spring of '69 we had a big earthquake here and that's when the rumors were going around that Jean Dixon had predicted that Socorro would be destroyed. And she said no, she never made any such predictions.* We had one in 1912 or 1914 that it attacked most of the chimneys in town. And then later on - we've had mild shocks. *Well they say here at Tech that there's rarely a day that the earth doesn't shift a little and we never hear about it. I've never heard of any theory connecting earthquakes with this fault.* The pressure of one layer grinding against another is what causes earthquakes and when they break there's a shock. We don't have any living vulcanism. *Well the earthquake we had in '69 was heavy on the seismoimage graph, but somehow it didn't cause damage.* It may be how long it lasts. *Do we have anything more about wells? I wonder how we would get hold of a well witcher like that, because that's a good story.* Well, he's out of Pie Town. He might be staying there, I don't know. Mr. Craig was a lonely man, I didn't know who he was at the time. I probably heard his name. *One thing I would like to know about wells, how deep are they?* The deepest wells are about thirty feet. *And that was good water?* It's potable water, we thought it was good. *What kind of water did you say?* Potable water, good to drink. In those days we didn't have detergents. We made our own soap. We made everything we had including candles. We cured our own meat. My grandmother, Carrie, she carded wool and wove cloth. *She didn't have any spare time, did she?* She was a little old lady that was busy all the time. She had lost her teeth in childhood, I guess, and she chewed snuff and smoked a pipe. *How about vegetables, did you all have a vegetable garden?* Yes ma'am, we had to have a vegetable garden. *Did you dry or can them?* In jars, and it was a difficult process. We used to drive to (Denver?). Mr. Byers, he raised lots of food. *And that's the one that was left to the Salvation Army.* Right, and during cherry season we went out there to pick our own cherries and then we'd pay for them. Then we'd bring them home and can them. And apples - we made apple sauce or dried the apples - and peaches - they'd put them in bags and hang 'em up. Prunes and stuff like that, we'd dry them in the sun. later on they got so they could can peaches. Something else I had to do was milk and take care of the hogs - we had a hundred head of hogs. There were diseases, and we had to keep other hogs out. Cholera was a bad disease - but anyway we would kill four hogs and render the lard and put up the ham and the bacon. And we'd kill two beeves and we'd kill them in cold weather and sometimes we'd kill one in the summer and jerk the beef. *And that seems to be particularly western because there isn't too much moisture here.* It was a job, and it had to be done, and we got up at four o'clock in the morning and we worked all day until it was dark. You

would either do or do without. *Do you think in the early days, there was much influence of the Spanish?* To a certain extent, yes ma'am because there were dishes that we wouldn't have had otherwise. All of these enchiladas ---. *And cracklin's and we ate hominy in the south. And that's what posole is. Incidentally, in Mexico, if you say chile they don't think of it as we think of green chile or a bown of chile. Chile to them is a powder. I was trying to tell them how we made chile, a couple of cups of chile or something like that, and they were thinking of a powder, and finally we came to the conclusion that chile is a bowl of chile, that we eat the crackers, they don't know.* That's right, I imagine that chile was regulated? by the Indians - it isn't Mexican at all. I think that probably Indians in some localities have adopted that. *I think the bowl of chile as we know it originated in Texas.* It may have. *And sopaipillas, I imagine came from Santa Rosa because I remember when I was out in California everybody said, aren't you going to take sopaipillas? It's kind of a version of Navajo fry bread.* There's something else in connection with this meat that the pork - the ham and the bacon - was salted and allowed to dry. And then it was put in the smokehouse and stacked up to the ceiling and the ceiling had a kind of windmill deal and you'd hang your meat up and use corn cobs and mesquite and make a smoke. The women also made a lot of their own clothing and stuff - Navajo rugs, we used to buy or trade with the Indians. There was always traders coming around - these traders knew all the tribes up there. *Would they stay overnight.* Oh yeah, they might stay two or three days. *Were they Indians?* Some of them were Spanish people and some were Indians. When they would arrive, there would be kind of a pot luck deal. Some Navajos came in and wanted some wool. I said I haven't got any wool on hand - I sold my wool, but I'll send the word around. ---- (Navajo blankets) -- It takes so long, and most of them have the designs in their head, *In your youth, did you come into contact with Indians very much?* Oh yes, - no trouble, the Indians were no trouble. The only people that gave us trouble was Texans, a lot of them were out there- car thieves. *What about the hanging tree here - somebody said be sure to ask him about the hanging tree of Elfego Baca.* Oh, no, I knew Elfego Baca well in his later life, but he was a lawyer. Well that hanging tree, or Death Alley --- *Where is Death Alley?* Death Alley is or was the street that had cottonwood trees on either side. *Where is it - is it in Socorro?* Yes ma'am as I remember that street has the Bursum house. The vigilante committee which grandfather Greenwald told me was probably some of those characters - Bill Smith, Captain Cooney - I knew him - and they invited this gentleman out to - they figured they'd let him go or get away - and he killed some people and they just took him out an hung him. *Did they make it a habit of hanging people?* No ma'am, of course they executed them later in the jail. That was in Territorial days. *That was in the 80's wasn't it? Now a question I wanted to ask - the French quarter - now why the French quarter?* There were some French people here - the Fraissinets on Bursum Street. And I don't know if the Bacas talked French - quality people in those days, you know, they really looked up to them. They were rich people. In fact the priest used to hold all these outdoor activities and on holy days they would have a procession and they would go out in the fields and bless the fields. *They don't do any of that anymore, Well those processions - it's too bad --.* Well the younger generation of priests, they didn't continue with that. In the north they like processions. They used to be - every time there was one of those saint's days they'd crucify one of those fellows they'd cover those crosses. *Do you remember the gypsies?* Oh yes, there were two types - apparently there

were two types - they would come in from Mexico in wagons. There was a wagon train and they kind of lived off the country. They brought a certain amount of barter and trade and some of them would work and technicians and such like dentists and some were thieves - some of them were crooks and ran race horses. Every town like Socorro had this group of race horse people and at that time certain individuals would acquire a race horse and as soon as they would get four or five hundred dollars ---*Well now when Claire? Campbell was saying that before (---) they had a (---) conclave of some sort. He tell how he used to travel in the summer to watch the gypsy bands, but they don't come any more. I think they turned them back at the border. There's two types of gypsies - the Spanish gypsies and the Syrian types or around Turkey or somewhere. But they were a hilarious type of people - dancing and singing for entertainment. And their mode of dress was completely different from ours. This is Sue Litle and I've been interviewing John Greenwald. I've learned so much.*