

Socorro County Historical Society, Oral History Tapes

Leo Fay and Jenny Fortune interviewed by Sue Little

Speaking of the M up on the mountain. I think it would be nice to know where the M started. I really don't know myself. *Mr. Fay, when did you come to Socorro?* Well I came on June 28, 1923. I came here with my wife and my three year old son to take management of the Gem Theater. *Where was the Gem Theater?* Well the Gem Theater at that time was located where the Safeway store is now on the west side of the Plaza. *That was next to the Park Hotel.* Yes and I stayed at the Park Hotel the first week we were here waiting until we could find a home, and later on, of course we all know the Park Hotel was razed and all that block was torn down and you know without any regard for the historical value of it. It has a great historical value, a lot of it I don't even know. One thing I remember mostly was they told me you are now in the place where General Lew Wallace spent quite a bit of time writing Ben Hur. I can say I slept where General Wallace slept. *I hear more sorrow expressed for the razing of the Park Hotel.* Yes I think it's a shame. At that time so many people didn't realize that we didn't have a historical society at that time and people didn't think about that. Some people said, Oh it's too bad they didn't do anything about it. So many of the buildings have been torn down, It's a shame. Now they are trying to preserve some of them. Are we getting a (wet dog?) look now, and people are reporting in and calling in and it's really quite thrilling. Do you know a lot of that applies to the whole country. I was back in Alabama and Tennessee and I found (that) reading historical notes in the paper. I just came up from Mexico and after all I want to tell you what the government is doing for history down in Mexico. There is just a tremendous ---- It's just a little late. Yes, I think so too. You know one thing I might add - one thing that got me interested - my wife was quite a person about history and she always cut out all the items. She took pictures, and these are some of the pictures. She kept them at the old Gem Theater when we first came here and I noticed one in particular. But there's a picture similar to that in one of your books now. An historical book and it says in the 20's, but of course it was taken in the late 1920's because if you'll notice here, this is our car and I brought the first car into Socorro with the balloon tires. And I know that everybody laughed and said Oh Boy and I don't know whether somebody did it on purpose, but one of my tires went flat. And you had to get out and get under. Well, let's go back to the Gem Theater. Well in those days we had so many of the big spectacular films and I might say at that time Socorro had just a little under 1600 population - in 1920 I think the population was given at 1400. So I played those spectaculars that in those days - The Virginian and the (---) Brothers, those were the two big pictures that I remember like I said we had the lights - we couldn't run any show too long because the lights were so high - 20 cents a kilowatt (hour). Anybody that knows anything about kilowatts knows that that was a terrific price - they had no rates for commercial use at all so we did well to run one show per night at that time. The lights came on from sundown to sunup - that was the only time we had lights nothing during the day, Nobody had electrical appliances in those days at all, they couldn't use washing machines - they could do ironing, but they had to do it at night. We had no water heater. I had two big coal burning stoves which I used for heat and fortunately our winters were much milder than they are now. *Before we go into that, I'd like to ask you, was the opera*

house in operation when you came here? Yes, it was. *What kind of shows did they have then?* Do you mean were they having shows? Oh no they they hadn't had show for some time before because it had been more or less condemned because they were afraid to have anything inside although they did once in a while have something inside, I remember they used to have exhibits and stuff but they cut having the theaters. That's the reason why we would have these boys from school - we had the only stage in town. They had nothing out at the school. They had a very small enrollment at that time. *Did you know any of the professors?* Yes, Professor Reese and Professor Welch. They had what - about 80 students? I don't think they had that many, but of course there was a group of boys coming in from the war - that increased it quite a bit, but I don't think they had many students at that time. It was interesting to hear you talk about the veterans - it was the veteran's bill of rights . Yes, they were, -something similar to the GI bill they have now - the congress tried to help these boys out for education. *So you remember two in particular?* Oh yes, I remember a lot - yes they were interested in education as well as putting on some entertainment the (--) was quite an entertainer in his own right - Spud? Murphy. Spud died just this last year down in Mexico and I took up with those boys for years. They used to take care of the shows whenever I had to go anyplace. The boys would always come over and take care of the show for me. *But they were (---) for you after World War I?* They came up to school here and they became very successful. *Well, let's go back to the weather. Everybody talks about the weather.* Well in those days we didn't think too much about it. We just had some very bad - and I remember one year in particular and I think it was a year I was playing at the Gem and it seems to me it was '24 or '25 because I know I hadn't done it too long. I made the remark, you know you folks I never saw snow like this in Wyoming before I came down here. You know it was terrific, but in a few days the snow was all gone. *What was it you told me about the tunnels in Magdalena?* Well I couldn't get up there at that time, but they told me they had to tunnel in through the streets to get into the stores at that time. It just covered clear up above the canopies out over the stores. And down south of here people got stuck in the blizzard that night and they were a good 12 hours before anyone could get down there with any kind of help. They had even taken the cushions out of their cars, you know, to burn and keep warm because in those days they had no paved roads. It was just the old gravel roads between here and T or C back in that canyon down there between here and T or C. Well you know we had a little argument here, some said it was paved in 1922. No it wasn't. I can guarantee that because I used to go up through the Blue Canyon. That was the road at that time. There was no paving at all, and we were lots of times we'd had to pull off to the side of the road because we could see another car was coming around the curves. No there was no paving in those days there and the reason I could remember so vividly, I decided to outfox (--) fox, and I took over the theater up there in Magdalena. I had an uncle I wanted to bring out here for his health, and so I took over the old theater in Magdalena. I got a lease on it and ran it for three years and went up there at least once a week, you know, to pick up the films so I know that there was no paving. A couple of times going up there to the store, I almost got stuck in the snow. *How long did it take you to get to Magdalena?* Oh I could drive up there in about an hour, less than an hour, it was pretty slow In those days because our cars weren't so speedy then. We had to go through the old Blue Canyon because it was later before they built the road around the hill. I don't remember when they paved that, but it was much later. It was just a gravel

road for a while. *But in itself it was quite an improvement over Blue Canyon* -. Oh my! Well I should say it was. *Well what about this (charter?)*? Well the charter was about '29. I remember that quite distinctly because I was down at the theater putting up my stores one day and a group of people came down to see me and told me I had been elected. Could we talk about your stove? All we had in those days - we had a great big stove. We burned wood and coal, mostly coal, to keep the heat up and I think we did cover that (topic) Fortunately, our winters were much better then than they are now. It didn't last so long but like I said I was in there putting up these (--) and that's how I remember the floods so distinctly and they advised me I had been elected chairman of the Red Cross. The Red Cross had been gone for a number of years and a group were thinking we should revive it because we had fires and other things, and they told me all you have to do is just conduct the meetings. So I agreed to get mixed up in a lot of affairs at that time, and I guess they thought I was a good one - they thought I didn't have enough to do. So I agreed to take it over and that was the year that the floods - well they hit in '28 - the first one - In '29 was the worst one in August and September as I remember. *Were those caused by lack of dams, heavy snows, rains or what?* Yeah, mostly heavy rains - we didn't have any dams at that time. The San Acacia dam was built later than that and so we'd had a lot of snow up in the mountains and so when it came down through the river wasn't able to handle it, so it hit down here and it just took the whole valley. When it hit, of course, I immediately called up the national organization because we weren't equipped to handle that at all. We had no money in our treasury so they sent down a Major Trench from Denver and he set up headquarters. I had a little office at that time that I was running; I had a little real estate and insurance business on the side so we just turned the office over to him. We spent over thirty thousand dollars between San Acacia and San Marcia rehabilitating people out there. A lot of people don't know that, but the Red Cross did a wonderful job in those days. *Thirty thousand dollars in 1928 and 1929 was a lot of money.* Oh yes it was all of this money - the first flood in '28 wasn't as disastrous as that, and we did send them some money, but so much and of course we brought in - and I took some pictures and I can't locate them. I will some of these days, though. But that was a really disastrous flood which destroyed San Marcial. *Did they lose any lives in that flood?* No, that was the fortunate thing about it we were warned and I don't recall any lives being lost at all, just property. Well of course you had to feed them and clothe them and house them somehow. Yes, you know it took the school and the church down there and locally it told in the books that we have now, George Sickles that's Percy's father, you know, no, his uncle I mean, and he was quite active in those days, and I believe they have a pretty good history about the flood during '29 but they don't know so much about the part that the Red Cross played in the --- I thought it was. *You talked about the 1895 flood. That was the first (worst?) flood, wasn't it? Did it hit Socorro?* ---Tingley. Carrie Tingley? Who did you mention - the book that was? Mrs. Tingley? Carrie Tingley. No you're thinking about another Tingley. No that's another Tingley. Mrs. Tingley was one of the real old timers here. She came many many years and they lived out in the Water Canyon district. They had some mining properties and stuff out there. *Now talking about the flood.* (Fortune:) Well the water came in our back door and out the front. My older sister was just a young little girl. My father and mother lived in Clifton, Arizona, so they had to take her on horseback out of the house. They told her there was a child with diphtheria ---

(incoherent) to Leo: *Tell us today what happened.* Well they put that big channel around the town. You probably know about it, don't you, they put it where the road goes around the mountain and comes clear back here past the TB San. That catches it. And that's only been done in the last ten years, I guess, because we a lot of floods even after I came here. Some of them were cloudbursts and some of them were just heavy rains but thre was nowhere for the water to go, it just came through here . We had the old slaughterhouse out of town here for a long time, well they still have it on the road to Magdalene. You go across that bridge about two miles out of town and that took a lot of the water, but it just came right through the town. When I had the theater I seen the water come down there and go right through the old Keith Garage which is right next to the (--). I seen the water come out through the doors of the Keith Garage. The show was protected by the Keith Garage, you see, (Fortune): Well that's the reason for the steps tht go up and then come down. (Fay) Where (---) lives? Across from the Safeway and the Telephone Office. That's the reason they have that big (border?) because otherwise it would come down right through the house, you know. *So that was flood protection?* (Fortune) Where it's built up - cement- and you go up through the gate and then down. (Fay) I wish you would go there some times. I believe they've had some tours. (Fortune) I was in old Mexico then so I missed it. (Fay) They got some wonderful stuff there, it's really historical. Well they've gone a long way in flood control here, haven't they? No where were we, Mr. Fay?

I was telling you about the talking pictures. The old Vitaphone system, I don't think I told you about that. They had sound on records. Now the records, when talking pictures first came out they came out with records. The recording machine was synchronized to the film. Every once in a while the film would break and of course it was almost impossible to get the thing back in adjustment here, and there was some very funny situations come up. Sometimes they would be talking about one thing and the picture was going on with something else. But it was a new era in motion pictures is what it was. But un fortunately they developed what they called sound on film and that was the reason I said unfortunately because it cost us a lot of money to go from one system to another, but after you got the sound on film and the record became obsolete. *Is that what is known as the sound track?* Yed, I think the first picture I ran was Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer*. Of course he was a marveous actor to start with and that was a marvelous film for those days. Later on I showed *The Gold Diggers of Broadway*, one of the big pictures of those days that you all remember so distinctly, and they were really something for people to look at, you know. When I had this film, I remember I was making a note of it here you kept abreast of the times and I adopted a slogan which I carried on for years in my ads. And it was adopted later on by several others. My slogan was "Read the list please - must please to live." There was a big write-up on it at that time in the motion picture journals because they thought it was quite clever and they borrowed it from me and it was carried on. I should have sold it I guess. But then I was appointed postmaster in 1934, and I sold my film to a fellow named Jack (Forest?) and he took it on and by that time Socorro had grown in population to a little over 2000. As I remember in the 1930's we had a population of 2037. We may not have had that, but I think we did because we hired Percy Miller at that time. He was Chief of the Fire Department and we need the proclamation of 2000 in order to get the help through the state, and we came out with that 47 population we was able to get through the state to help us out with our stuff. So I

remember that so distinctly because I was a member of the Fire Department and we had Percy so we'd get this additional help, you know. *One question. Did you have a picture show every night or just on weekends?* Just one picture show a night, because it cost so much to run with the 20-cent (electricity). If we had something real special with big crowds we would go out and carry over into another night. In those days the population was small and transportation was difficult, but we did draw people from San Marcial and Carthage. *Did you show on Sunday?* Oh yes, Sunday was usually our big day. *Was popcorn popular?* Oh yes, we had a popcorn machine just like they have nowadays. It kept people at the picture show. I believe it did, well there was nothing else to do in those days unless they put on a dance or something there was nothing to do around this small town, and the picture show was the main entertainment you know. There was no television. No radio? It was the heyday of picture shows. *Well what happened to that building?* Well it was razed when the old Park Hotel - it was all in one group and there was the Park Hotel and Sam's Sugar Bowl - next to the Sugar Bowl was the Gem Theater and Keith's Garage. There was a restaurant, wasn't there? Well, a confectionary shop - they served short order meals, but it was mostly for popcorn and drinks and ice cream and stuff like that, you know. It was quite a popular place. It was right next to the show. People would come into the show and bring their bag of popcorn with them. *Well I like popcorn.* I think I told you I sold the theater in 1932 and it went to Jack Forest. *Then how long were you postmaster?* Well the Post office at that time was right on the corner in the old Zimmerly building. They had a fire in there and they moved the Post Office to where it is now. Right on the corner of the highway and going up to the park. So the old theater was there and I went in there as Postmaster in 1934 and served for twelve and a half years, but later on I went back to the Post Office and worked as a clerk because I retired - I can't remember when I retired, but I remember when it was because I got it back in 1928 and I worked for twelve and a half ---. *The Post Office was where the florist is now.* Well yeah, when I went in there over there on the corner there was a fire, and then they built the new Post Office. When I went in there it was the only new building.

And then I came back late on when it was moved downtown to where the Post Office is now. *Well now when you were there the railroad was the chief carrier for mail, wasn't it?* Yes, they would have the mail cars there and everything. *And how did you get your mail from the Post Office to the train?* Well a contractor brought the mail up from the Post Office - they had a contract out for people to bring the mail in. Just like they did in the old building. And that was four mails a day, actually, because there were two northbound and two southbound. Oh yes, there was lots of mail in those days. We had much better mail service than we have today because of the rail service. When they discontinued carrying the mail there, they started using buses or trucks and we still have two mails a day. Something they have done in the last few years - they have cut it down to one delivery a day. Now we just have the one delivery and the mail comes in at night and goes out at night. *Well those were quite exciting days, I --.* *The Great Train Robbery. You never had that?* No, they had some pictures, but they never (ha ha ha)--. At one time someone told me there was seven trains going up and down. There was a lot of trains going up and down then - two passenger trains - they had two trains a day north and they had two south so we had a lot of service in those days. (rambling) I told you about the money we spent on the floods? That came out of the national Red Cross. Yes I

got in touch with them as soon as we had this flood in that yer of '29 and '29. I was putting up stoves? I don't know whether I told you about that or not. A bunch of people came to me and told me that wanted me to take over the Chairmanship - they told me there was nothing to it except to get the thing organized if they did have a disaster or anything, and so I was full of vim and vigor at that time. (end of side) and it was that very year when the floods hit. Well I called for national help and they sent the trains here and there was a Major Trench who came in at that time and we set up thirty thousand dollars to take care of that down at San Marcial, but like I say, there was a lot of things to do at the front. *Tell me, did they send in the National Guard at that time? Like they do today when they have a disaster?* Well we had a Guard troop here at that time and they - so we called out our own Guard and again later on in - like I say, when we had our other flood that was still another story so that goes on. This one here, when the Guard wa called out at the beginning of the war and everything and we had - I was on that committee too. I was a glutton for punishment in those days. I remember Bill West who was one of the boys I talked about on this thing, Bill became a an activ man here and became head publicity man and stuff like that and we organized what we called the State Guard when they called the National Guard out at the beginning of the war ans so Bill and I were very active - we run this squad? thing during that time - there was quite a story behind it too. I got a lot of information on that. I think we ought to put everything we have on Park City and the Opera House and put it all on one tape. Of ourse, unfortunately in those days we didn't keep a lot of records, but my wife is responsible for lots of this stuff. She wa very much interested in the historical stuff and most of this stuff was pictures that she took and different write-ups that I came across during the years she kind of doted on stuff like that. After she died, I put all that stuff together and I'm still going through books and trying to sort out all of this stuff we have gathered together. *When you get all that , you come back for another time. We want to get alll this down, and we'll just leave this as an open end.* Jenny has a lot of information too. You'd be surprised ant how much stuff she has when you start working it up. She was one of the old timers when I came here. *As I remember she was elected Secretary of State for some time and she was County Clerk for a long time.* Back in those days it was almost impossible to elect a Democrat, one of the few I remember --- (rambling) Jenny's got a lot of stuff, that's one of the reasons I wanted her to come along today so she can give you more on the early history than I can. There is a family with 8 girls. *Write these things down.* I remember somebody was telling me Eddie Rickenbacker came to town and was making the first automobile trip from New York to Los Angeles and he spent the night at the Park Hotel. There was some very interesting stuff about the old Park Hotel. I'm sorry that I don't hve more of it. *I wonder who has the hotel registers and that?* Mrs. Mora? has the stuff on that - she was Mrs. Cook's niece. Is that the *Cook family that has the (---) Building?* Yes, George Cook, isn't it, so this - I imagine she must have already been interviewed because she has a lot of ---. Bill Griffith is another one. Bill has a lot of history behind him. I think my wife should have been an historian. She used to play the piano real well, and she also played the clarinet and the saxophone. She sang very well. Speaking of music, what kind of music did you have at your theater? Well I had a big music box that was a player piano - it had these big rolls that we used to play. When I came here I had to use my wife up front - she played th piano very well. But we had these big music rolls and I often wondered what happened to them. If I had a jazzy

picture, I would try to pick out jazzy music. I gave away those old records to different people. The Fortunes were one of the first families we met when we first came here and we used to go over there and visit them even after my wife got sick, I would take her over to the Fortunes, because they lived right across from the Safeway. She and her sister, Florence used to sing in the choir (at San Miguel). *I want both of you to make a list, and it doesn't need to be anything elaborate, for example, Eddie Rickenbacker came through for example, and if you would just write little notes for yourself, it's amazing how much history comes out. (rambling).* Get a hold of Lena Merriweather if you can. She talked about gypsies - the national conclave they used to have here. I don't know why they quit after World War I, but they used to come. Lets see, I've got (Price?) Hammel and Pedro? Montoya.