

Socorro County Historical Society, Oral History Tapes

Helena Griffith Merriweather interviewed by Ellen Davis

His real name is (Abernagel) but Americans call him (Abie-abie). They call his father Nagel and Nagel was a brother of Elfego, Elfego and Nagel were brothers and they were brought up in Kansas. I don't know why their father went back there and they spoke English perfectly so they had a great advantage over the other Spanish-Americans. *Did Elfego marry a local girl?* No, she was half German and half Spanish-American I knew her as a child. Elfego wasn't very good to her - he kept her home mostly. *Well, that was a lot of the Spanish style.* Yes, but he was mean, he really was. They glorified him just as they have done Pancho Villa, but there wasn't anything very glorious about him. *I got an article from the Arizona Republican on Pancho Villa and his widow.* The widow - he had several - you know he married 'em all . It made him feel better to go to church. *Do you know how she described that?* No. *She said "I was the cathedral, and the others were just the castle."* Well, that might be so but it's just an old church. I saw her picture. I had to smile because I went down to Mexico about that time and he wasn't awful popular. You know my mother is from Mexico. She's a Lafoya and she's from Chihuahua. That's where I was born. Pancho Villa was real cute there, you know, and the Lafoya family - he's not a hero to them. *All right, your name again?* Helena Griffith Merriweather. *And would you mind telling us your age?* Eighty-two. *And you were born?* In Ohio. *You came to Socorro in?* In 1898. President McKinley appointed my father, John Elvis Griffith his name was, Clerk of the United States Court in the 9th Judicial District in the Territory of New Mexico. My parents and my paternal grandmother met Johnny Griffith who married George E. Cook four years later and arrived on the fourth of July to take up residence in the tall brick house with the round tower opposite the present junior high school building. A two-story grade school building occupied the latter side, and the County Court House was north of it, just as it is today. The old Court House was of dark red brick in the style of the 1880's with the face of a clock on a steeple in front. It wasn't a real clock - just a painted face and it was unique in that it had the numbers in Arabic from 12 to 6 while the rest of them were Roman numerals. It was said that the workman who painted the clock had a long rest period and a few drinks at the cantina across the street when he had been about halfway through the job and was a bit confused when he went back to his work. Facing the Court House was the home of (Escapula) Pino. The father of Mrs. Paul Fraissinet and Mrs. --- Pino. Between his back yard and the plaza were seven or eight small tin-roofed houses where a few Chinese lived and had a laundry business. The small boys at that time used to like to put walnut shells on the feet of cats and put them on the tin roofs and the Chinese would come out with long knives and of course they loved that. On the southeast corner of the plaza August Baker a native of Alsace-Lorraine had his bakery and his Mexican ontx soda fountain which was the most popular thing in Socorro and hotel dining room. Now the business places are Jessie's and the Socorro Drug Company. Back of the dining room was a long double-walled bedroom facing each other. The old Park Hotel was a small cafe and a large hardware store occupied the entire western side of the plaza (torn down to build the Safeway Store). And the Ed Fortune Store was across the street on the corner just as it is today. A brick building on the northwest corner

of the plaza was a law office of Mr. James Fitch and another brick building just north of it was the office of The Socorro Chieftain. The Belen Savings and Loan Association has their building, that is the building where Mr. Fitch's office was and the Bank of Socorro stands in the place of the old Chieftain Office. There was no School of Mines Road then and in order to reach that Institution one had to go on a gravel road that ran around the front part of the old Catholic Cemetery. With the exception of a few scattered houses, there was nothing there except a small adobe house across the road that was occupied by a dentist named (Saylor) and his family. The street leading from the plaza to the Catholic Church was very crooked and the Garcia Opera House and the long Garcia residence looked very much the same as (though) the old Juan Jose store across the way on the corner. There no paved streets and no sidewalks except for a high wooden that reached for the first block of Manzanares Avenue on the north side and an old wooden sidewalk on the south side. There were several stores on both sides of that block, the largest being owned by Henry Chambon where the Gamble's Store is. His home is on Church Street and is owned by his daughter, Mrs. Marie Garrett. The house is a large brick one built by the same man who designed the old Sperling home now owned by David Shortess. Mr. Sperling had th town's largest grocery store on the high side of that first block on Manzanares Avenue. Mr. Alfred E. Howell had a drug store next door to Daddy (Laysons) as he was called had a sort of general store with Chinese cooking vessels and toys. On the southwest corner of Manzanares and California was a two-story adobe post office owned by (Anas ---) Abeyta and his brother Frank. Frank had a jewelry store in the next block which is now Fraissinet's bakery. Mr. Frank Abeyta made very beautiful gold and silver filagree jewelry using only the simplest of tools and a Bunsen burner. I was allowed to watch him make it because I was a friend of his godchild, so if we would keep very quiet he would let us watch him make this jewelry. The Fair Store on the northeast corner of Manzanares and California was owned by Buddy H. (Byers?). On the large lot east of the store he stored a big supply of wagons and farm machinery and tools of all kinds. The first State Bank of Socorro is built upon that lot. Mr. Byers opened the safe in his store one time to cash a check for me and he had taken out a large rusty milk pan full of gold pieces. About ten (caskets?) were piled around the safe which was in the back of the store and by the way, his bed was back among the caskets. The Loma Theater next to the bank was once the dry goods and grocery store of Price Brothers and Company who also owned a small bank at the Conoco station across from the Fair Store. The old Windsor Hotel occupied approximately the same space where the Val Verde Hotel now stands. Spring Street was an arroyo and a very dangerous one when there were heavy rains in the mountains to the west. Joe Hilton, the brother of Mrs. Ann Hilton Olsen ran across that arroyo when it was clear to the brim and rocks running down and he ran across it and he said girls couldn't do that, so of course I did. Next to us were the Hiltons so we played together all the time. There were few homes south of the arroyo with the exception of two of them in the extreme southeastern part of town. Their (names?) were a small smelter in Cuba and all of the buildings no longer used still stood near the base of Socorro Mountain. The latter had been built by Gustav Billing in about 1881 when Socorro was a population of 25,000 and was the larges city in the Territory of New Mexico. By the time my family arrived in 1898 there were only about 1500 persons living in the former Piro Indian village of Pilabo which was renamed by Onate as Nuestra Senora de Socorro (our lady of

help). *Tell me, where did you meet Mr. Merriweather?* He came here to build the railroad from (---) and Raton to the coal mines. He was a civil engineer. And then after he built the railroad, he accepted a job as State Highway Engineer. He was down here building roads with convict labor - the old road through Socorro Mountain - what is it called - it goes south of Socorro Mountain. They call it M Mountain, but it shouldn't be called that. It's not a very good road now because it's not kept up but it was the first road through the mountains (usually called the Blue Canyon Road) and he built that with convict labor. And that's where I met him. As a matter of fact I met him at the Depot. He was riding with Eddie Price who was president of this Price Bothers Bank and he had the second automobile in Socorro and the only road you could ride on was cinders from California down to the Depot, and he was riding very proudly back and forth with his car and that was 1911. He asked my husband to ride with him and down at the Depot Colonel Hilton who was the father of Tony Hilton and his daughter Feliz who was afterwards one of my bridesmaids and Edna Hammel who was Clarence Hammel's sister and Clarence Hammel owned the old brewery which is now still standing on 6th Street and Eddie Price said, "I'd like you to meet these young women ." And my husband said he was going to leave Socorro next week and the poor man didn't get away in time. We went to the Governor's Ball and in those days girls didn't go bouncing off and he was supposed to have made reservations for us and when we got there we couldn't find a place to stay until we finally found a little very humble hotel and we got a room under the eaves, but we were thankful to get it. We ate in the big dining room of the Palace Hotel which was situated about where the La Fonda is now, a little bit west of it, and everyone ate there who was going to attend the ceremony and Colonel Hilton undertook to tell us about the people in the dining room and he said in a loud voice, "Do you see that tall skinny woman in green over by the window?" And the tall skinny woman turned and looked at us - it was Mrs. Albert Fall and I had to meet her that night in the reception hall. I hoped she didn't remember me. And then he said, "You see that girl over there?" I said yes I knew her very well. It was Madelaine Mills, the daughter of the last Territorial Governor. I went to Howard University in the summer and I knew the Mills very well and Madelaine was a very good friend of mine so I had to hush it up and pay no attention. He said, "She's a fine girl, but her father's a drunkard." He wasn't at all - he just took a few drinks, but at that point Feliz said "Let's go." I said, "yes, let's." We didn't finish our meal. And then I had a date with a boy, Clinton Crandall, whose father was superintendent of the Indian School in Santa Fe, but I didn't much want to go with him because the other girls didn't have dates, but in those days your escort took your card and had it filled and Clinton said, "Don't worry, Colonel Hilton will bring the girls and there will be many more young men than women and I'll see that your card is filled, so by the time they get there their cards will be all filled. So Clinton came to me to go about nine o'clock and I went down the line by Mrs. Albert Fall and at ten we went to the ball. Eleven o'clock came and twelve o'clock came and still they weren't there. And Clinton said I can't hold the cards anymore so I said I can't imagine what happened and what happened was - Mrs. Hilton told Mr. Hilton, "Be sure to have your dinner jacket pressed because when you get there I know you'll be visiting with people." He knew everybody all over the state - but he didn't start to get dressed until about nine o'clock and we had to change trains in Albuquerque and he got a hold of the wrong suitcase and when he opened it, it was a Buster Brown suit for a boy about eight. Everybody we knew was at

the ball, so we went to the ball and asked - can you lend me some pants? -can you lend me a coat? He showed me a vest he had borrowed from a much larger man and it came way over his chest and he had brown shoes and he couldn't get any shoes so he had blacked them, but he hadn't done a very good job. The belle of the ball was a sister of Ed Luna and she was then a Mrs. (Brigere>) - she was the mother of about eight children but she was a beautiful and very young looking woman. She was, I thought, the most beautiful woman at the ball. *And then what proceeded - I'm interested in your romance?* Well, I was teaching grade school - I was teaching fifth grade when I met Mr. Merriweather and met him on January first. We were married on October sixteenth of that same year. He resigned his job because he was gone from home all the time and we went to live in Las Cruces where he built the first permanent road from Las Cruces to the border straight south. We stayed there two years and then we went to various places where he was still a civil engineer. *Did you have any children?* Yes, I had four daughters - two born in Las Cruces - I lost my first one - one born in Springfield, Missouri and one at my husbands ancestral estate near St. Louis, Missouri. My three daughters are all married. My oldest daughter is Mrs. Frank (Debride?) and her husband works for the W. R. Grace Company in New York City and Mrs. Bell who is a widow and spent most of her life in Dallas but now lives in Albuquerque and my youngest daughter, Eleanor, who live in Tucson. *Can you think of anything else in Socorro that you might tell about?* Many things - I'd have to be here all day to tell about them, but so many things I know have a breath of scandal. I wouldn't dare tell or I might get run out of town. I'll tell you, who told me a great many things was Dr. Antonio Abeyta who graduated from this school and then he went to Pachuco, Mecixo and then he decided he wanted to be a doctor so he went back to Philadelphia and studied medicine and then specialized in ophthalmology and he's a sister? of Mrs. Sarracino of Polvadera and he used to come back to see his sister every year and he would always come to the house to see me and he told me most of the tales of old Socorro that happened before even I was here. He'd say well you know my aunt Florence well you know my uncle (Florenzo) and then he'd tell something about his people and he was very interesting. *I don't suppose that there is any written record about his work, is there?* I don't think so - He didn't write - no he would just tell us first hand. But my uncle, George Cook, came in 1881 as a small boy of four and his father was in the Civil War in Virginia and he went north to Indiana after the war and married Mr. Cook's mother who was Annetta Fisher. They went in a covered wagon to Kansas where George Cook was born. Then they went to Colorado and that was in 1881 and things were booming down here so then they came on in a covered wagon to Socorro where they all died. My uncle George spoke Spanish as well as he spoke English so he knew so many old stories that most Anglos don't hear and his father was sheriff also in those days and he could tell the most interesting things about Socorro. I know parts of them but not well enough to tell them all. But he did help to capture quite a few desperados in his time. *I'm sure that your'e acquainted with a book by Father Stanley --* Yes, anyway, but I was just looking at his book but it is not accurate. He made many mistakes. *The reason I was asking is that I was finishing reading his book and I was wondering, you know --* He wrote it too fast. He, being a priest, had the mans of getting material that I'm sure many of us couldn't get He wrote too many books - lived just a little while in a place and then wrote it. I read about four or five pages and I picked out several mistakes right there and he misspelled so many --*I noticed the*

misspelling -- He wasn't accurate. He was foolish. His name was Stanley something else and they called him Stanley because most people couldn't pronounce his last name. I've forgotten what his last name was. *But he was a parish priest here.* Yes, he was a parish priest. I used to meet him at the home of Henry Morris - you see, Henry Morris was Polish. He married Lupe Gallegos. Mrs. Morris came to live here after Henry was married and she had a daughter, Joan, and she was a very good Polish cook because Father Stanley loved nothing better than to eat at Mrs. Morris' home. I used to talk to him there, but as I say I didn't give him any of his material and he wrote it too fast. He made many mistakes. He had such interesting material if he had been more accurate. *Well, what was the college here then?* One building - the Old Main building. *What we call Brown Hall.* Well, it isn't then - it was a two-story building - a great big stone building and I have to tell you how the people of Socorro saved it. Would you like to hear how? *I certainly would.* Well, at the time in 1900 colleges were having a hard time. My aunt, Mrs. Cook, was going to the University of Albuquerque and it had only about three buildings and they wanted to take the New Mexico School of Mines and build a building and include it in their university. Well, we were very proud of our School of Mines although they used to say that there was a teacher for every pupil. About 18 or 19 students and about 6 or 7 professors. And they could have very easily lost it. The business men in Socorro couldn't stand that and my father was on the school board and he went to see all the people he thought would help as did Mr. C. T. Brown and Mr. Fitch and many Spanish-Americans who were interested in the school and they went out and proposed to the Board of Regents that if they would teach high school subjects and people paid the same tuition as the students were paying would they take them? They said they'd be only too glad to, but they were going to lose the school. So these gentlemen canvassed the town and there weren't more than ten who raised a hassle. You see we had the old convent then that went through the eighth grade and so many stopped at the eighth grade. The school said they had to have at least fifty to make it pay for them to get high school teachers. So they said would you put in the fifth sixth seventh and eighth grades and they said yes. So they canvassed the town again and there were at least fifty of them. My father took me out as did all the other loyal fathers and we were registered with just our initials so we would look like men - it wasn't coed then you see. I started at the School of Mines. I went to the fifth, sixth and seventh grade that year. I would have gone to eighth and then gone off to school, but then my mother died when I was in the seventh grade and I finished the seventh grade again and then Ann Olsen told me she didn't go in the grades here but she did go to high school in a little building across the street - evidently a high school. They had discontinued the grades. They employed three teachers for the high school. One was Miss Atkinson, Julia Atkinson, and she was the first one to wear bloomers. She rode a bicycle and My! she was the talk of the town. They didn't think she was fit to teach young people and she taught mathematics and afterwards, married President (Tees) of the college. And they taught afterwards at the University of Arizona - both of them. And then Miss Ann Fitch who was the sister of Mr. James T. Fitch, the lawyer, who was a graduate of Wellesley, taught us history and English and things of that kind and then there was another teacher, but I can't remember her name - another woman teacher, and they were all together in one great big room, but we would go to different rooms for classes. They were very good teachers too - we studied really hard. That's what saved the school, and I don't know how long that high

school went on but eventually the school was built up enough that they didn't have to have a -- I told Dr. Paige Christiansen all of this and he wrote the history of the school but he didn't put this in about the raid on the high school. Perhaps they didn't want to admit that they once did this, but I don't know why because many of our best colleges were only academies when they started. So I'm and alumna of the school. *You referred to Hilton's father as a Colonel, was he* I was an honorary title. He wasn't a colonel. He ran a general merchandise store in San Antonio, but he was not really a colonel. Everybody liked him - he knew everybody in the State - he was always traveling around here and there. One time Feliz Hilton who taught with me in the old grade building and my father went to Denver to a Shrine convention and he sent me back a big picture of the group and at one side here was Colonel Hilton. She said there's papa. He wasn't a Shriner, he just got on the train and went along with my father. He was quite a character - everybody liked him and he was killed during the first World War on his way to San Antonio with a horse and buggy and it rolled over. *Well, how about the church here Mrs. Merriweather- had it been remodeled to the way it is now?* No, it wasn't - it's been remodeled - no I have a picture of it - it's inside of Stanley's book - you can take a look at it. It was that way when I was a little girl. I used to go to the police house which was next to it and Mrs. C. T. Brown and I went to Father (Stopher) two winters twice a week to read French and converse with him because we were boh forgetting it and we had studied it - we didn't need the grammar, but we just needed to practice, so we took an hour twice a week to read and converse with Father (Stopher). I got a lot of the history of the church from him. *Well Mr. Van landingham is in charge of remodeling it now.* Well, I read that they were going to - well I suppose it looks sturdy enough. Of course you know that one corner- if it were all there - it would be the oldest church in the United States. But just one corner was saved - that must have been unusually strong. I survived two Apache attacks - that northwest corner. *They tell me that Father La Breche has sent a sample to be dated - I suppose from that wall, btu I' not sure.* That's the oldest part. *And he hopes to establish that it is the oldest remains.* I had a perfectly beautiful altar piece when I was a child that was carved by the Indians. It was so old and lovely that one time I took a friend with me down to see it, and there I found this very modern one. Father Mueller, a German, was the priest then and I said, "Oh father, what have you done with the old altar piece?" He said it was so old I just took it out. Just think - we came here to see it, and I said, "What did you do with it?" and he said, "Oh I don't know." Wasn't that a pity? It was very beautiful, but it's just plaster of paris like any church and this lovely old hand-carved one - it was made at the same time as the corbels were made. *Well, I called the lady that knows about what they are doing now and she said that the tin ceiling over the main altar had been brought down, you know, for repair and they found these beautiful vigas still in place covered up by that old tin all this time.* Well you know, the old houses, so many of them did have vigas. And then when they're modernized, they're covered by a canvass ceiling. Those canvas ceilings sagged and got full of dirt and mice and one thing and another. Now people are taking off the old canvass and restoring it. Mr. and Mrs. Cook lived in what is now Dr. Chapin's home, Las Ollas, and it is one of the oldest houses in Socorro. When my aunt died, she left me Las Ollas and that didn't look at all the way it does now, it was just an adobe house with two ells and a patio in the back. They completed it and every year they did something to it, and finally the last thing they did was cut a hole in that wall and spoiled it. It was

designed by an architect up in Santa Fe. Of course there should be little santos in those places, but you couldn't keep them - they'd be stolen. You see the ollas was a sign of hospitality because the ranchers in the early days always kept an olla with a gunny sack around it for travelers, because the first thing they wanted was water. So the olla is a symbol of hospitality. On either side of the gate, the lettering was made by a Mexican when the house was remodeled the last time. A Mexican blacksmith who is dead now - he lived down by the Val Verde on the other side of the street and Uncle had him make those. The whole front porch is 52 feet long and it had entirely antiques from Mexico and Spain - the rest of the house was modern, but that front porch was entirely Mexican. I sold them, most of them because I couldn't keep them in my apartment and my children took some of them that they wanted and Leona Klipsch of the Chieftain bought an old soda fountain that came out of this store which had it put there by August Grunier. He was the one who first had that store with the soda fountain and it was made of Mexican onyx. My uncle found it in a small building that he bought where Gene's Flower and Gift Shop is now - at least the top part of it. The bottom part was gone - it was destroyed. So we had Mr. Bianchi? - a carpenter fix the bottom part so we could use it for a dish cupboard. That was in our bedroom and also a marble topped table and the Klipsches bought that and they had those pieces in their home. *Do you live by yourself?* I do - I have a small apartment halfway down the School of Mines Road with a patio with brick ends for the building on the right side. *I would love to hear more of your story - it's wonderful.* Well, I happen to have lived here quite a while. I lived away my married life, but the last fourteen years of my life I spent with Mrs. Cook because her husband had died and she didn't want to live alone so I lived with her for 14 years. She died in '67. It took me fourteen months to get things out of that house and then I moved to my apartment. I have been away a good bit of the time. I travel a great deal. I took one trip around the world and one around South America. Last year my daughter had lived in Mexico City but I knew it as far as Acapulco as well as she did. So we decided we would take a bus from Mexico City on down to the Isthmus and Guatemala and Yucatan and Honduras which we did and we visited the Mayan ruins and Toltec. I still call Socorro home and it's the only place where I have hay fever. And if I didn't love it so I would leave. *Now the plaza when you were a child had a lot more vegetation around it.* No, it had a fence around it and in the middle was a bandstand. The band played every Sunday. T. M. Marcellino, an Italian who married the daughter of the Armijos, who built the old house up at Taos. He married the daughter - her name was Lola and her picture was there when we moved there and she looked very young and I believe she died in childbirth. He never married again. He taught music although he couldn't read a note, but he could play every instrument by ear. He led the band in that little bandstand and in Mexican fashion the girls walked one way and the boys walked another and that way they could slip in a word or two to each other. In those days we had dances in the old Opera House. You'd see Ms. Garcia and we had the raspa and the (---iana) and the Spanish quadrille - it was very difficult because we didn't have a caller and you had to memorize them and there were about ten different sets and you had to memorize what came next. Not only each set but what came in the second set and there about ten sets. A girl didn't go to a dance with a boy - she went with an aunt or her mother or an older friend and they took their seat and they were their seats for the evening. The young man would come and ask her to dance and between each set of a quadrille was about a five-minute rest period and he would

bring her back to her seat and then he would go off and leave and stand with the men at the end of the hall. He didn't stay there with her - he went off. I learned the steps from an old Frenchman who came here when I was about nine years old and he gave dancing lessons to us all - he taught us all those things. So I was able to go there. It was just the upper classes - wedding dances, mostly, so I went to them all. *Was it plush?* No, it wasn't plush at all, it was very bare looking. We had a few plays during th year - Uncle Tom's Cabin and things like that, but it was never plush. ---I went to Albuquerque with my father, especially after my mother died because he was a lawyer and when he would go to different cities he was District Attorney at the time of his death. He would go and stay with other lawyers families because we had such a big house - the hotels weren't very good in those days. Did I tell you that there was an old Windsor Hotel where the Val Verde is now? I believe I didn't say that. (she did) It was the best hotel in town but it wasn't very good because one morning there were two traveling men sitting in the lobby and there was a Mr. Monroe who ran the hotel and just as he came to the lobby, one of them said to the other traveling man, "How did you rest last night?" And he said, "Oh, I was troubled with insomnia." Mr. Monroe said, "You're a liar. There's not a one in the house.?" *When I read about the early days in Socorro about that period of time, it seems to me that there were several smaller business activities.* There was. A great many little businesses. - little tiny ones. On the first block of Manzanares there were a lot of little stores along. Not later on - when we came - but later on Ann Olsen's grandfather, Dr. (---) opened up a pharmacy when he got too old to practice medicine. Dr. (--) was the father of Mrs. C. T. Brown and Mr. Lee K. Hilton had the drug store. Mr. Hilton had a leather shop next to Fraissinet's Bakery and when he died, she helped her father in the pharmacy. At that time you didn't have to be a graduate pharmacist, but you had to pass an examination and she helped her father and was a very bright woman and it was said she passed the examination as one of the highest in the State He left it to her, but it wasn't where it is now on the corner - it was further down. When I say pharmacy I mean pharmacy. There were drugs in jars on the shelves. And there wasn't a lead pencil nor a box of candy or anything = just drugs and you had to wait for him to take your prescription. H had a mortar and pestle and he ground it and put it in little papers that he folded and when you took it you stuck out your tongue and took a glass of water. It was a real drug store, and Ann Olsen still has some of those jars. He was from Austria and a graduate of the University of Vienna. It was the finest medical school in the world at that time. I remember one little shop and I can't remember the woman's name but she had kind of a rummage shop. She bought clothes from people in pretty good shape and sold them and some new things. I was in there one day and she had knickers and a woman said these are a man's knickers. And she said no they aren't mens they are non-sex. Down the street further there was a doctor's and dentists's office in the old corner building across from Dr. Auerbach's office. That was the Socorro First State Bank down there. End of tape