



INTERVIEW WITH RAY STWALLEY

“Session Two – Life in New Mexico”

“Perhaps in the West, there is a little less emphasis on ancestry or ethnicity and a little more emphasis on the individual.” Ray Stwalley

Marv: You moved to New Mexico when you were 12 years old. How was this part of the west different?

Ray: We moved from the mountains, which was snow, to a place where I never wore a heavy coat, until I came to Boulder, Colorado, to go to school. Southern New Mexico dipped to the 30s once and I saw snow once in 6 years. So for a kid that typical saw snow once every 3 weeks, this was a change.

Ray: Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, was desert town that was totally different than Salida, Colorado. First of all the town was a “drying up and withering away” agricultural market town. It had some reputation as a health spa. People came to the hot springs in the winter. A cool day in the summer was 95 degrees. While in the winter, a cool day was 40 degrees. People came to Truth or Consequences that couldn’t afford Phoenix and Tucson. Retired farmers from the plains of Colorado came down and stayed for the winter.

Marv: Sure, I know folks from North Dakota that went down for the health properties of the springs.

Ray: There is a spring there called Geronimo Spring. Geronimo was from a tribe of Apaches that came from Sierra County, New Mexico. So this was their home ground.

Marv: The Chiriqua Apache.

Ray: So Geronimo occasionally soaked there. The problem was there were no witnesses, who lived.

Marv: If it wasn’t true, it should have been.

Ray: The Indians treated the mineral hot water as healing. They soaked their horses’ sore hooves, as well as their own sore bodies.

Ray: When I was a teenager, I would know somebody with a bath house and go swimming in the middle of the winter.

Ray: Truth or Consequences was a winter spot for old folks and in the summer, east of town was a structure called Elephant Butte Dam, which is one of the larger dams, built by the Bureau of Reclamation. It was built between 1911 and 1916, which created Elephant Butte Lake. It was a wonderful idea but forgot that the Rio Grande River really doesn’t have a lot of water. When it’s full it goes 60 miles north. It is the largest impoundment of water in New Mexico. Now it’s become the largest single recreational facility in the state. Actually the town of Truth or Consequences is smaller than the new comer town of Hot Springs Landing, which is out at the lake. When I was a kid, Hot Springs Landing was a marina, concession on the lake. We’d go there because it had a beach. So during the day you would go out and swim and at night you would party.

Marv: Obviously there was a Hispanic influence there. What was that like?

Ray: When I was in high school, half or more of Sierra County was Hispanic. You could get in real trouble if you call them Mexicans. Because many of their families had lived there before there was a Mexico. They had moved into that area when it was New Spain. Many also had in their ancestry Comanche or Apache. So there was a certain fiery aspect to their nature. I grew up with people with names like Torres, Chavez, and Armijo and on and on. Montoya was a very common name. If you look at the names of my graduating class of '60, which was the largest graduating class to date, one half of the graduating class was Hispanic. That had some influence on me. That is that I grew up not thinking of Hispanics as a minority group. Hispanics are not a minority in New Mexico.

Marv: So culturally there were differences, as well.

Ray: Oh yes. The Catholic Church was an influence in Salida, Colorado, because of the Italians and the Irish. The Catholic Church was a massive influence in New Mexico because of the Spanish.

Marv: Talk about the difference in foods.

Ray: Oh yeah, I grew up there with Mexican food. Although there were not a lot of Mexican restaurants then, there are some very good restaurants there now. They're also more expensive now. I took my wife down, a few years ago. She remembers that we had two excellent meals but she didn't appreciate the weather. We went in June when it was hot and windy.

Marv: Were you accepted reasonably well?

Ray: Being Anglo was not a problem. The problem with moving into a community when you're going into Junior High will always be a challenge. I do believe it's worse in a small town. I came into Junior High and the bulk of the kids that were in my class had been together since first grade. So I came in as an outsider. Six years later when I left for college at the University of Colorado, I wasn't the newest person in town but I wasn't the same thing I was at Salida. People knew my grandfather, in Salida. The really old timers knew my great-grandfather. Nobody knew me or my history in New Mexico other than my mother was a teacher. Now only in Junior High can you understand the pain of being a teacher's son.

Marv: The burden.

Ray: My people, in my classes, had my mother as a teacher. So this is how I was perceived by my peers.

Marv: Were the elements there that we think of when we think about the west? Was the frontier spirit there?

Ray: I think, in some ways, it was different. You have a number of different influences in New Mexico; Truth or Consequences was on the Northern edge of the Mesilla influence. Mesilla is the southern anchor of the Spanish that includes a school of cooking. You had the Indian wars. Truth or Consequences emerged after a lot of western history. So, as a lot of the little mining and ranching towns no longer were viable, the market structure condensed into the county seat. These little towns had been much more dynamic before WWII. So after the war, we were known as a semi-retirement center with many of those people not living there year round.

Ray: History wise we had Billy the Kid who roamed around there, although Billy the Kid's name was much bigger over in Lincoln County. We already mentioned Geronimo, who was a piece of the history even though he did most of his marauding over in Arizona.

Ray: To our north was a cattle ranching area where you needed at least 40 acres to the cow. I remember we had a hay ride, out at this ranch and I asked how big the ranch was. He said, "We have a small place, only 36 sections." So this was 36 square miles, well that's close to the size of the city of Denver. Now to the south we had a large dairy that was nationally famous for its Guernsey cows. They

produce this milk that had a high butter fat content, which was a “big deal” back in the 1950s. Cotton was big and this was not Alabama cotton this was Long Staple Egyptian Cotton. This was in great demand for certain kinds of cotton fabrics.

Ray: There was a little town, south of Truth or Consequences, called Hatch. We played them in football. I remember one game where it was 48 to zero at the half. So the joke was that in the fourth quarter our coach put the band in. There was a big local following. Hatch survived on farming and speeding tickets. The farmers moved from cotton into chilies. Hatch green chilies are somewhat famous. Surprisingly the Hatch chilies are all processed in Deming. Hatch has a Chile festival every year. So if it is on your “Bucket List,” ...however, it’s in August.

Marv: Everybody should do Hatch once.

Ray: I received an invite to the 40th reunion of my class. They held it the first weekend in August and my sister asked me why I didn’t go. I said, “It may have been 40 years but I still remember Truth or Consequences the first weekend in August. Now the first of October could have tempted me.”

Marv: Ray, you’ve lived in the East during your career. Are there things you noticed that are a little different about the West vs. the East?

Ray: Perhaps in the West, there is a little less emphasis on ancestry or ethnicity and a little more emphasis on the individual.

Marv: The little time I spent in Virginia, as part of my Navy service, the DAR was a big feather in your cap.

Ray: Ethan Allen was one of our relatives and according to family history, was an outlaw. He was in the protection/extortion business. He joined the revolution because the British had a price on his head. Before the war he ran the “Green Mountain Boys,” who were a protection outfit.

Marv: Well, a lot of our heroes had a colorful past.

Marv: I think one of the things that I have a sense of is this open space, nothingness that kind of draws me where people not from the west want to get across it or are frightened by it.

Ray: I think there’s that. Well, there’s a beauty that has an impact on you and a different feeling. The sunsets in the desert are astounding.

Marv: I think you have a sense of creation and recognition as to how small you are.

Ray: I think you learn certain things about surviving in nature.

Ray: I will say, in conclusion, whether it’s Salida, Colorado or Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, I’m glad I had the opportunity to grow up and return to the west.

Marv: Thanks Ray, for your perspective and local history. You’ve added a personal flavor that’s unique. Thanks again, Ray Stwalley.