



CHUCK LAKIN
1921 - 2013

**Honored as a Historymaker 2014
Ranching Innovator and Preservationist**



The following is an oral history interview with Chuck Lakin (**CL**) conducted by Pam Stevenson (**PS**) for Historical League, Inc. and video-graphed by Carol De Cosmo (**CC**) on May 10, 2013 at Lakin's home.

Transcripts for website edited by members of Historical League, Inc.

Original tapes are in the collection of the Arizona Heritage Center Archives, an Historical Society Museum, Tempe, Arizona.

PS I always start off by identifying on the tape that today is Friday, May the 10th, 2013. We're doing this interview in Phoenix at the Lakin home. This is Pam Stevenson doing the interview and Carole De Cosmo is running the camera. And, if you would give me your full name.

CL My full name is Charles Austin Lakin.

PS Okay. Can you tell me where and when were you born?

CL I was born on, June 11, 1921 in Fort Scott, Kansas.

PS And, how did you come to Arizona?

CL Well, my father was involved in the wholesale grocery business, and he got involved in the Arizona Wholesale Grocery Company. And so, moved us out here.

PS Do you know why he moved you out here?

CL Well, for one thing we were, we were all sickly. And he wanted us in a healthier environment.

PS So, how old were you when you came to Arizona?

CL Six months.



PS So, you're almost a native Arizonan, you could say.

CL I call myself ... Native Son.

PS Okay. And, tell me a little bit...what was Arizona like when you were growing up here?

CL Well, one thing I remember about it is, in the summertime, it seems as if we had a dust storm every afternoon. Any time the wind blew, all the desert was loose, and, so it would blow off a lot of dust.

PS As a boy, what kind of things did you do to keep busy?

CL Oh, my goodness. Well, we played a lot of neighborhood games with balls, basketball and things like that with the kids. And kind of ran wild around the neighborhood. Did a lot of swimming.

PS Where did you swim? Did you have a swimming pool?

CL My parents belonged at the Country Club at the time, so, we'd swim out there.

PS What country club was that?

CL The Phoenix Club.

PS What part of Phoenix did you live in?

CL We lived on Palm Lane. I can't think of the street number.

PS But, what we call downtown now.

CL Yeah. It's, definitely downtown now.

PS It wasn't downtown then though, was it?

CL No. It was considered out in the country.

PS And, so where did you go to school?

CL I started, went to elementary school at Emerson. And then to Phoenix Union High. And then they shipped me off to New Mexico, when I was high school age, they shipped me off to New Mexico



Military Institute.

It was supposed to keep me out of trouble, but I don't think it had that, that effect. I enjoyed it out there because everybody, every boy rode horseback. And we did military, learned military horsemanship. That sort of thing.

PS So, is that when the, the military still had horse cavalry?

CL Yes.

PS What was that like?

CL Well, it taught us discipline. And, we learned all these intricate maneuvers. And later on, I was to teach that to, to troops myself. And, had some interesting experiences.

One of them... We were having a platoon exercise. I was in charge of the platoon of youngsters. And we were up on the hilltop looking down, and there were some people doing a pistol charge. They were charging across the flat with their pistols, imaginary pistols, at the ready. These kids said, Lieutenant, why can't we do that? I said, okay. Well, yeah, we can do that. Keep control of your horses.

Well, that didn't work cause soon as we started down the hill toward the stables, they just took off. And kids were falling off and everything else. Of course, I had to go talk to the commanding officer about that. Was in violation of all sorts of rules.

PS So, they didn't know how to ride horses?

CL No. Not very well.

PS But, you did.

CL Yeah, I'd grown up on a horse.

PS So, even in, in Central Phoenix, what we call Central Phoenix now...

CL Well, we were in the cattle business. We had a ranch at Camp Wood, Arizona. Or near Camp Wood, Arizona. Northwest of Prescott. Thirty-five miles out.

That was a good size operation. Seventy square miles. About, approximately 35,000 acres. And, eventually I covered practically every inch of that...horseback.



PS That's, that's why they put you in charge of the, the platoon. In the cavalry. Because you knew the horses.

CL Yeah, well, of course, that came later. I mean, the ranch business came later. I'm not doing a very good job here.

PS Well, let's go back and talk about you. You went over to New Mexico in high school?

CL Yes.

PS You went to some military high school, right?

CL Yes.

PS Then, what about college?

CL Well, I went one year of high school and one year of junior college at New Mexico Military Institute. And then from there I came back to the U of A.

I remember I was there at NMMI for two, exactly two years and six days.

I got in a squabble with the management there. So, I just caught a bus for Tucson. I called my dad and said, Dad, guess where I am. And he said, I hope you're in Roswell. And I said, nope, I'm in Tucson.

They let me sign up for sophomore subjects at the U of A.

PS What were you studying?

CL Agriculture, College of Agriculture. Nowadays they call it the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

PS They changed all those names. Why were you studying agriculture?

CL Because that was our business. We were farming. A good size farm out there on the West side which we still have. About a thousand acres, well 920, to be exact. The size of the farm.

PS You were going to study agriculture, so you could come home and run the farm?



CL Yes.

PS How did you like, the U of A?

CL Oh, I loved U of A. There was so much more freedom there than there was at NMMI.

PS So how long ...

CL I got to join a fraternity. I was there for, I guess, three years. Something like that. I joined the Sigma Nu Fraternity. Had a wonderful time. I had way too much fun.

PS So, did you graduate then?

CL Well, this sounds kind of funny, but I did. Sixty years later I graduated.

I had written a little book of short stories and stuff, things that happened to me over my lifetime. Mostly funny things. And, the dean of the Ag College got a hold of that book and liked it. He was one of the reasons he gave for voting me up to, - scrub that.

PS Okay. We can do that. So, why didn't you graduate in the 40s when you were going to school as a young man? Go ahead and take a drink of water and think about your answer.

CL I went off to the Army.

PS Why was that?

CL Well, I had been in, in ROTC. If I wanted to be an officer, I had to make use of that advantage and go in as a ROTC officer, so I did.

PS So, when was that?

CL That was 1941.

PS So, that was during World War Two. Where were you stationed?

CL Well, I started out at Fort Reilly, Kansas. Which was back close to my home. Fort Reilly, I first studied... (coughing)

PS Want another drink of water?



CL I'm not thinking very clearly.

PS After Fort Reilly where did you go?

CL I was assigned to ... Well, I was down at Camp Hood, Texas. And, a friend of mine and I checked the bulletin board one day. And we were both young officers. Checked the bulletin board and it said, officers wishing to volunteer for quote hazardous jungle duty, that was that exact words, for hazardous jungle duty, sign below. So, my buddy and I looked at each other and signed up.

They shipped us, they let us go home for a little vacation and then they sent us first to communications school where I learned the Morse Code and all that. And then to mule pack school. So that's where I got interested in mules. And mules have been a part of my life ever since.

They're, they're smarter than horses by about fifty percent. They take care of themselves and a horse doesn't. A mule won't get into the grain bin and eat himself to death like a horse will.

PS So, did they send you off to the jungle like that sheet said?

CL Yes, they did.

PS What jungle?

CL Burma. Burma. You know, South Asia. And, we joined the 475th Infantry on the march from, a place called Myitkyina, Burma. Going north. I joined them on the run, so to speak.

PS So, did you see combat over there?

CL Yes. I guess so. I've got a Purple Heart to prove it.

PS What did you do?

CL Just a piece of shrapnel in the knee, which wasn't too serious. It was enough to get me out of the shooting war for a little while.

PS Well, how did you get shot? What were you doing?

CL I was hunkering down in a hole. (laughs) Can't say I was leading up a charge or anything like that. We were down a hole and I remember...



I was down in there with big ol' ...Captain Wilkinson. And, this barrage came in. We both jumped in this hole. And, I felt something like somebody had hit me in the knee with a poleax. Wilkie, Captain Wilkinson, was saying, oh, my leg, oh, my leg.

So, I crawled around there, cause the hole was an L-shaped thing. I crawled around and said, where you hit? Wilkie, where you hit? He said, I'm not hit, I sprained my leg when I jumped in the hole. So, I says, well, take care of me. I'm hit.

PS And who was shooting at you?

CL Well, the Japanese, of course. In that theater of war, it was all Japanese. There were no Germans there.

PS Were they on the ground, too? Did they come after you in the hole?

CL No. They was pretty mobile.

CL What'd she say?

PS She said for you to take your time and catch your breath. Take a drink of water if you need to. We can stop anytime. If you need a little break. So how did you get out of that hole and get to the hospital?

CL Yeah, they evacuated me in a little airplane. An L, they called it an L-One. Little, like a Piper Cub sort of thing. Flew me back to the 41st Evac Hospital. And, they X-rayed my knee to see how bad it was and all that.

PS Where was the hospital?

CL Forty-eighth Evac Hospital was in Myitkyina, Burma.

PS So you were still in Burma.

CL Yeah, I was still in Burma.

PS Did you go back into combat after that?

CL When I went back it was to a different organization.



PS Did you have horses over there, too, or mules?

CL We had mules. I was Regimental Mule Pack Officer for the 475th Infantry.

PS So it was an infantry, not a cavalry.

CL It was called the infantry. Though you couldn't tell the difference between the cavalry and the infantry. They were both afoot, leading mules.

But I had been to mule pack school, and taught the proper way to pack. And we had Phillips Pack Saddles that weighed 91-pounds all by themselves before you even put a load on them.

Had some interesting experiences. We got to a bivouac area one night. There was an airdrop. Everything we got was dropped to us from the air. All our supplies. There was no other way to get them to us. So, we had been to the drop field and picked up loads of stuff to bring to our bivouac area. And, I got a message that two items that had been left at the drop field.

So, I thought that was not particularly out of the ordinary. The two items I pictured as regular, they dropped them in regular canvas-covered packages. And I thought I'd just load those two. But one of them was a, a little motor generator. Probably weighed well over 100 pounds. And the other item was a box of message books. So, when you have a situation like that you put the heavy, heaviest load on top as high as you can get on the mule. And the other one down low the other side.

So, that's the way I did it. And I got it, got them back to camp. All, all right.

But coming down that time, I remember coming down the dark road. All of a sudden, I heard a lot of noise up ahead of me and I didn't know what to think about it. A bunch of natives that were coming along, and they had learned to make a noise to identify themselves, so we wouldn't shoot them up. But it was still scary.

PS Was it just you and the mule? Were there any other people with you?

CL Well, I had volunteered to go get those. You're never supposed to volunteer in the Army, they say, but I did. (laughter) And, more than once.

PS So, how long were you over in Burma?

CL I was in Burma about...I wasn't there a year was I, Sal? I don't think I was there a year.



PS So, when did you come back to Arizona?

CL What made me come back?

PS Yeah. When and why did you come back?

CL Well this was where family was. And, family farm.

PS When did you get out of the military?

CL In 1940...let me think. I had to fly all the way from Phoenix to Fort (breathes)...my memory isn't very good.

PS Well, it was a long time ago. (laughs) Were you glad to get back to Phoenix?

CL Of course.

I did have...for a time we were in California. I was in charge of the, what they call a detached platoon. And our, our duty was to control the coast. We had one patrol that went from our camp to...north to the Los Angeles city limits. And another patrol went south to the Mexican border every night. That was right along the coastline. Right along Highway 1. Because if there was going to be an invasion by the Japanese that's where it would be expected, along, along the coastline there.

PS Well, that's a nice area to patrol. (laughs) So, you were in the military until the war ended?

CL Yes. I was in the, I was in the, 29:30 actually I was in the hospital...in Myitkina when we heard that they'd dropped, dropped the first bomb. On Nagasaki. And then the other one on Hiroshima.

PS What did you think of that?

CL Well, of course that looked like the end of the war. Which it pretty much was.

The Japanese, as you know, gave it all up when that happened.

PS So, you were able to come back?

CL Sure. So, they sent everybody home finally. I had to go down to ... I'm trying to think ... some military establishment in the South. And get mustered out. So, from then on out I was a civilian



again.

PS And, as a civilian what did you do?

CL Well, I went right to work for my dad. To help him run the farm. And we had a little feedlot. We could feed about 500 steers.

PS Where was that?

CL Right there on Dysart Road and, and Broadway where our office is at the present time.

PS Five hundred head doesn't sound little to me.

CL That's a small feedlot in Arizona. For example, down at McElhane Feedlot down in Wellton, near Yuma. They feed about 10,000 at a time. That's a sizable operation.

I was elected Chairman of the Arizona Cattle Feeders Association, which, uh, very honored to, to be. I don't know why they did because I was a smalltime operator. But I guess...

PS So why did you come back to work on the farm instead of going back to college?

CL That's a good question.

CL Yeah, I guess so. Dad needed me on the farm and feedlot. Yeah. He said, I didn't need any more education.

pa Did you have brothers and sisters that worked on the farm, too?

CL No. I had three sisters, but none of them worked.

PS No brothers?

CL No brothers. I really wished I had brothers cause I'd a'had somebody to rope with.

PS So, tell me a little bit more about how you stayed and got involved in your father's farm and ranching.

CL Well, we had not only the farm and the little feedlot down here. We had a ... My dad had gotten a forest service grazing permit northwest of Prescott. Seventy, seventy square miles worth.



Forty-three-thousand acres. And it sounds huge. It's a pretty good-sized piece of ground.

We only had our forest permit, which the government allowed us to run so many cattle. Four-hundred-and-ninety-one mother cows. Which was a ridiculously small number for that big a piece of ground.

PS The cattle that you had, were these cattle that were for beef cattle?

CL Beef cattle. Yeah.

PS Not dairy cattle.

CL Not dairy cattle.

PS So, did you spend time up there in Prescott?

CL Spent a lot of time up there.

PS You want to finish telling me about Prescott?

CL I used to call Prescott, my second home town. I got to know it pretty well.

PS Why don't you tell me a little about your personal life. When did you meet your wife? And how did you meet her?

CL Well, I knew her in college. Yeah, I remember how I met her. I had a date to ... New Year's, I think it was a New Year's Eve party. And my date stood me up, so I went stag.

And I'm sitting on the sidelines watching the, everybody dancing. And I saw a guy dancing with this gorgeous redhead, so I went and cut in. That's how I met her.

PS So, did you stay in touch after that when you went away?

CL Yes.

I wrote her pretty regularly, but she didn't write me much.

And I had a good friend I thought, that was a B-25 pilot.

CL Okay. I'll leave that alone.



PS Now I want to know. (laughs)

PS Well, I just wondered about when did you get married?

CL We got married in a little church right here in...little First Congregational Church here in Phoenix. Reverend Barnhill was the minister there. Nice fella.

PS Was she also a farmer? Or ranching person?

CL Who?

PS Your wife. When you got married.

CL No.

PS Did she live on a farms and ranches?

CL No. She'd never been close to one.

PS So, what were your plans then when you got married?

CL What was my plan?

PS Hmm, hm.

CL I don't know if I had a plan.

PS Okay, so where did the two of you set up your home?

CL Well, we first rented a little apartment upstairs over a commercial garage. It was down close to 7th...not far from here actually...7th Avenue and McDowell maybe. There was a little restaurant called the Coffee Pot.

PS I think I've seen pictures of that. It looked like a coffee pot.

CL Yeah, it was. It was shaped like a coffee pot.

PS When did you go back to living on the ranch? Or the farm?



CL Never actually lived on the farm. Max didn't want to do that. She wanted to be able to get to town real easy. So, she insisted that we live close to town. So that's the way it was.

PS So you just commuted to the farm.

CL I did the commuting.

PS So, tell me...you were talking about raising cattle. When did you get into raising horses, too?

CL Well, I'd always had an interest in horses. And, quarter horses in particular because they were what cowboys used to rope on. And, I wanted to learn to rope, which I did. Got to do a little bit of roping.

Had to do a lot of roping actually; in our business there's a lot of roping to do. You saw an animal that needed doctoring or something like that, and you're out with a bunch of them out somewhere, you don't have to drive the whole bunch of them into the ranch and put 'em through a squeeze shoot. Two of you head and heel, stretch 'em out and doctor 'em, and then turn them loose.

PS So, you did roping that was on the working ranch.

CL Yes

PS Not in a rodeo.

CL Right. Did a lot of it.

PS Now, I understand you also developed some cattle feed and horse feed. Want to tell me about that?

CL Yes, we developed a palletized horse feed that we actually...we started ...We didn't picture it as a horse feed to begin with. We were going to use it as a cattle feed by grinding up alfalfa and Bermuda grass, hay, and putting it through what they call a pellet mill to make little green pellets about that size.

I was interested in knowing whether the horses would eat it or not, so I tried some of it on the horses one day. And they gobbled it up and thrived on it. So, I got to thinking that maybe that that was the way we should use this, rather than cattle feed. Sell it for horse feed. And now we're selling close to 100-tons a day.



- PS** Why did you want to make it into pellets instead of just feeding them the alfalfa?
- CL** Because it's much more efficient. They digest it more readily, and, and it's very convenient. You can put a 80-pound bag of it on the backseat of your wife's Cadillac, and you can't do that with a bale of hay.
- PS** So, how did you start that business?
- CL** Well, I got one really prominent horseman, race horse guy, named Doc Pardee, to try them out. And at first, he wasn't interested. But one day he had a race mare that was off feed. They call it...they just stop eating for some reason or other. And he tried everything he could try on her, and he thought about that sack of pellets that I'd given him. And he shoveled out some of the pellets to this mare. She started eating right away. Got back on feed, so literally saved her life, that mare.
- PS** So, did you have to set up a factory to make these? Or, where did you make them?
- CL** We set up a little factory right at the home place, right there where our office is. Now, the factory's still there, and still making 'em.
- PS** I read somewhere that you also gave them to the young horses or, or cattle to help wean them off of their mother. Did you use them for that, too?
- CL** Not, not particularly, no.
- PS** So, did that become a big part of your business?
- CL** It became a major part eventually.
- PS** Were there other people doing that in other parts of the country?
- CL** Uh, uh. We had some copycats right away. Not in other parts of the country, but right here in the Phoenix area. We had some copycats that tried to break in on it.
- PS** You invented making those pellets?
- CL** I didn't invent it. I just adapted.
- PS** Okay. I understand you're also a poet. You write poetry?



CL I have written a little Cowboy Poetry, and I learned a, a lot of it down around to places where they have Cowboy Poetry Gatherings. We had a lot of them at the Arizona National Livestock show.

PS When did you start writing poetry?

CL I don't know remember.

I don't write a whole lot of it, but I did memorize an awful lot of it.

PS Do you have a favorite poem?

CL Well, I know a whole bunch of poems. I don't know that I have a favorite.

PS So you mentioned the Arizona National Livestock Show. You were involved with that?

CL Uh, huh.

PS Tell me about, how were you involved with that?

CL Well, we showed, we showed cattle and horses both at the Arizona National.

PS I remember there's always a lot of young people there when...were you involved with the 4-H and the young people, too?

CL Not very much.

PS Were your daughters involved with their horses?

CL Well, yeah. Linda and Sally both, I guess. Patty. Yeah, Patty more than any. Patty showed the horses at horse shows.

PS I know girls always liked horses. When I was growing up, I always wanted a horse. I never got to have a horse, but I went horseback riding.

CL All our girls rode. Yeah, we had a corral back, right back there in a corner of the yard.

PS Oh, that's great.

CL They rode, went over to Chris-Town. The girls would ride over there. There was nothing there



then.

PS It was a farm, wasn't it?

CL Uh, huh.

PS And, I understand you were very involved with the Arizona Quarter Horse Association.

CL Yes.

PS Tell me about that. What is that?

CL Well, it's a breed association, of course. And I became president of it. And also, chairman of the Arizona Cattle Feeders Association.

PS You've been busy. And you're involved with the Arizona Agri-Business Council.

CL Arizona Agri-Business Council is another one I got involved in.

PS How'd you get involved with that? What is that?

CL A group of farmers that, felt that we needed to be understood better by the public. The public doesn't understand farming very well. So, we decided that that was a good medium to communicate with the public.

PS You mentioned the Quarter Horse Association. What's the difference between a quarter horse and another kind of horse? Or like a race horse.

CL It's just a breed. And they are bred to...they're powerful. They're bred to run fast for a short distance. It's a cowboy's preference roping, so you can overtake a steer and rope him. And, turn around and then your partner comes in and heels him, and you stretch them out.

PS So, did you ever race them?

CL I never raced them, no. There is a lot of quarter horse racing, but I never got involved in it.

PS I know another thing you've gotten involved with is the Arizona Farm and Ranch Hall of Fame. And you donated some land to them. Can you tell me why you did that?

CL I don't know. I can't remember.



PS Well, maybe we can wrap things up here. How do you see, how have you seen Arizona change over your lifetime?

CL Well, it's become, like, right...big city. In the country.

PS How do you see the future for Arizona?

CL I'm...not any thought.

PS So, I don't...one issue I think has always been an issue, is water. Have you been involved with the water issues here?

CL I have to some extent.

We've always had adequate water for our, our own farm. We've been, we were very, very fortunate, to inherit a contract for tail water they call it, which is water that runs off of other people's farms, and it runs to a low point. And we were in that low point. We started out purchasing that water for a dollar an acre foot. You know what an acre foot is?

PS Hmm, hm. That's pretty cheap water, isn't it?

CL But we needed a lot of water because we had, that ground of ours was so alkaline we had to do a lot of flood irrigating to drive the alkali down, out of the surface area.

PS You didn't use groundwater then? Did you have groundwater also?

CL We had groundwater also. The groundwater was awful salty to start with, but it improved over time. We drilled three irrigation wells initially. That started out being pretty, pretty salty.

And then the more we pumped the better the water got. And eventually it was good enough water that we're still using it, that water.

PS Did you use any SRP canal water?

CL No. Well, just the tail water that I mentioned.

PS What about the Central Arizona Project? Did you involve...

CL No.



PS What did you think about the idea of bringing water from the Colorado River?

CL A fine idea as far as I'm concerned.

PS Did you think it would happen?

CL I don't know if I did or not.

PS I think they started talking about it in the 40s.

CL Yes.

PS So do you have all the water you need today for your ranch?

CL We still do. We're in good shape.

PS Do you think people are conserving water and using it well today?

CL I believe they are. I believe most people are aware of our water situation, and we help conserve.

PS Do you have any advice for young people that are growing up today, trying to decide what they want to do with their lives?

CL Stay out of farming. (laughter)

PS Why?

CL It's a kind of a hard way to go. I don't know. No, I don't have any.

PS Was farming a good life for you?

CL It's been a good life, but I don't know that it suits everybody else.

PS You've seen it change a lot, haven't you?

CL A lot.

PS How would you like to be remembered?



CL I don't know.

PS Something you want people to remember about you? Want to be remembered for your horses?
Or your ...

CL Yeah, I'd like to have them remember me as the guy that, that introduced pelletized horse feed to the world. And, while I don't take any credit for developing the pelleting system ...

PS But, you do take credit for making it for horses, right?

CL Yes.

PS And, what about all your horses? Are there any special...

CL We tried feeding, feeding the pellets to cattle and didn't do all that well. But we were breeding quarter horses at the time. I think we've been through this. And we started feeding them to the horses, and they flourished on them. So. I think we already covered that.

PS Is there anything I didn't ask you that I should have? Anything else you want to tell me?

CL I don't guess so. I'm not a very good responder to your...

PS Hard with the oxygen and everything. I appreciate you talking to us today.