

# The back page

## Chavez family million-dollar gift largest ever for Foundation

More than 70 years ago, a poor, barely literate Mexican boy began pursuing a dream that today has enabled his descendants to make the largest gift ever to the NMSU Foundation.

To honor the determination of Mesilla Valley pioneer farmer Jose Fernandez, his daughter Grace Chavez of Las Cruces has deeded over land in trust valued at more than one million dollars. The proceeds from the eventual sale of the six acres on El Paseo Road will create the Jose Fernandez Chair in Field Crop Production in the College of Agriculture as well as scholarships for agriculture students. The gift also means NMSU will receive \$450,000 in matching funds from the state of New Mexico to establish the chair, which is a permanently funded, prestigious professorship for an outstanding scientist in the field.

Grace and her husband, Enrique Chavez, who owns the Welcome Inn in Las Cruces, believe the gift in trust to the university is a fitting way to recognize the farmer who placed a high value on education, though he had virtually none himself.

"My dad was a believer in education because he thought it was something that no one can ever take away," said Mrs. Chavez, one of six children born to Jose and Manuela Martinez Fernandez. "He taught himself a great deal, but he always believed that if he had had an education, he would have done even better in life."

As it was, the boy who never learned to read and write until he was 21 years old nonetheless managed to acquire six farms in the Mesilla Valley, one for each

of his children before he retired from farming at age 74.

Jose Fernandez's story begins in Conchos, Mexico, in the state of Chihuahua, where he was born to a farmer Vicente Fernandez and Guadalupe Chavez de Fernandez in 1886. When Jose was 6, his father died, leaving his mother and three young children to support themselves. Two years later, she married Theodor Ruiz, a farmer and shoemaker. Searching for work, the family moved to Chihuahua City, later to Casas Grandes and finally to Janos, outside of Casas Grandes.

Through the years, Jose worked alongside his parents to put food on the family table. He and his stepfather sold pulke, a liquor they made from mesquite cactus, and later, Jose became a "teamster," delivering supplies by wagon train to small neighboring villages.

As a child, he never had the chance to go to school. In fact, he was 21 before he had any education at all. Then, he went to night school for two years to learn to read and write.

He wanted to join Pancho Villa in the revolution, he told his mother, but she objected. In fact, the family moved to Juarez to escape the war. Within months, Jose crossed the border into the United States where he worked as a teamster and laborer.

His children remember Jose Fernandez as being "a savings-minded man," perhaps the key to his success. When he had saved enough money from his hard labor, he lost no time in following his dream of becoming a farmer. He rented 40 acres in Santo



Jose Fernandez, 1886-1982

Tomas (now Stahmann Farms) and grew alfalfa, which he sold to the cavalry at Fort Bliss. That first year, he made enough money to buy a horse and buggy—signs of status in those days.

When he was 26 years old, he married Manuela Martinez, an El Paso factory worker, and they soon had a son, Vicente, and then another, Eduardo.

In 1916, the family moved to Mesilla Park and within a year Jose Fernandez bought his first piece of real estate—a three-room adobe home on Mesquite Street in Las Cruces, while he continued to rent farmland.

But his real yearning, for his own farm, was satisfied soon after. In 1919, he met Hiram Hadley, NMSU's founder and first president, and the next year, Fernandez bought five acres from Hadley for \$300—his first farm.

The children kept coming—Leonor, Rita, Luis, and finally Grace—and Fernandez bought land and houses, little by little. When he wasn't in the fields, he was supplementing his income by dredging irrigation ditches for the Bureau of Reclamation, clearing land for development of the young college, hauling wood for the college furnaces, or plowing the garden of President Hadley.

His children were his field helpers—but only after they went to school. Fernandez was adamant that his children get the education he never had.

By 1940, Jose Fernandez was 53 years old and had achieved a dream: he owned six small farms, each with a house, for each of his children.

Over the years, he had hung on to another dream, that someday he would have enough money to return to Mexico. But in 1956, Fernandez realized that his place would always be in the United States. Once again, he went to night school—this time to become a citizen at the age of 69.

Fernandez retired when he was 74 and gave the farms to his children. His wife, Manuela, died in 1977 at the age of 93. Fernandez was 95 when he died in 1982.

A few years ago, Grace Chavez and her son-in-law, Javier Vargas, county extension agent, went to a seminar on estate planning given by John Chappell, now retired from NMSU.

"I thought at the time that it would be

### Jose Fernandez

"My dad was a believer in education. He taught himself a great deal, but he always believed that if he had had an education, he would have done even better in life."

—Grace Fernandez Chavez

nice if someday I could make a gift to the university," she said.

The family's ties to NMSU include not only her father's friendship with Hiram Hadley but also her children's education. Daughter Henrietta Chavez Vargas and son Vincent Fernandez Chavez both are graduates of NMSU and daughter Emily "Toni" Martinez studied at the Dona Ana Branch Community College. Daughter Eva Marie Chavez graduated from Eastern New Mexico University.

Last year, the Chavez family's financial adviser, Roger Lord, '80, and NMSU professor Rich Gregory, who is an attorney, drew up a plan that enabled the Chavez family to put the land in a charitable remainder trust for the university. The complex arrangement benefits both the family and the institution, according to NMSU Vice President for Institutional Relations Bruce Streett and Development Executive Director Fred Hueston, who coordinated the gift.

"This gift is significant to us not only because it is the largest we've ever received and it will lend major support to agricultural research and student scholarships. It also is important because it is symbolic of the tie between the university and the valley's pioneering farm families.

"The land Jose Fernandez farmed, south of Boutz between El Paseo and Solano, was a link between the town and the university. This gift reminds us of that relationship and of our beginnings as an agricultural college," Streett said.

"I think my father would be really proud of this gift," Grace Chavez said. He will continue to have a part in developing the agriculture of this valley, she suggested, because the chair will be devoted to field crop production.

—Nena Singleton

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Grace and Henry Chavez of Las Cruces: giving NMSU its largest gift ever, a million-dollar chair in field crop production

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release



For immediate release -- May 7, 1992

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**NMSU Onion Breeder First to  
Hold Jose Fernandez Chair**

LAS CRUCES -- A New Mexico State University onion breeder has been named to be the first to occupy the Jose Fernandez chair in field crop production at the College of Agriculture and Home Economics. Joe N. Corgan assumed the permanently funded professorship May 1.

"Jose Fernandez was a man of the land," said John C. Owens, dean and chief administrative officer of the College of Agriculture and Home Economics. "So it is fitting for a scientist who has given so much to agricultural producers of this state to carry on the legacy of Mr. Fernandez. I thank Grace and Henry Chavez for the opportunity to enhance Dr. Corgan's research program."

Corgan said the chair was an honor and an opportunity to develop better onion varieties and more options for New Mexico growers. The chair will let Corgan expand his research program into additional areas.

Near the top of Corgan's list of new projects is the development of onion varieties that could attract the onion

MORE

dehydration industry to southern New Mexico. High solids, onions containing less water than other varieties, cost less to dehydrate, making them more desirable to food processors.

"There's been an interest among chile growers in growing onions for dehydration that would use their chile dehydration facilities during the early part of summer," said Corgan.

"Support from the chair will give us the opportunity to move into that area more vigorously, and do some preliminary work toward development of high solids overwintering varieties that could be grown here."

The onion breeder also intends to accelerate his search for cold-hardy onions, expanding the area for growing onions through New Mexico's winter months.

"More than 10 years ago, we identified onions that carry genetics for cold-hardiness, and made crosses between those and locally adapted varieties," said Corgan. "With the additional support provided by the Chair, we can develop facilities to select hardier varieties from these crosses."

Corgan said the cold-hardy onions will extend fall planting areas, and eliminate the need to transplant many acres of onions each spring.

Corgan's research led to the release of six new onion varieties over the past 12 years, and produced greater profits for New Mexico growers.

The Jose Fernandez Chair was created in 1988, when Grace and

Enrique "Henry" Chavez, Las Cruces, deeded over seven acres of prime real estate to the NMSU Foundation. The Chair was named in honor of Grace Chavez' father, a Mesilla Valley pioneer farmer.

Chavez is one of six children of Jose and Manuela Fernandez. She said her father was a self-made man, who learned to read and write by attending night school.

Jose Fernandez emigrated from Mexico and began growing alfalfa in the Mesilla Valley as a tenant farmer in the early part of this century. Fernandez saved his earnings, and in 1919, bought his first five-acre farm in Las Cruces for \$300 from Hiram Hadley, NMSU's founder and first president. Over the years, Fernandez accumulated five more farms, allowing him to leave one for each of his children when he retired at age 74.

Chavez believes her father, who died in 1982 at age 95, would approve of the endowment.

"I think he would have been elated with it. As he always told all of us to get all the education you can get, because no one can take that away from you," said Chavez.

This endowment is the largest of its kind ever made to the Foundation and designated for the College of Agriculture and Home Economics. The gift of land qualified NMSU for \$450,000 in matching funds from the state to support the chair. When the deed was signed over, the land was appraised at more than \$1 million. Proceeds from the sale of the land will go into a trust fund, and the interest from which will be used to support the chair.

Joe N. Corgan

Joe Corgan has been on the faculty of New Mexico State University's department of agronomy and horticulture since 1960. His responsibilities average 80 percent research and 20 percent teaching as a full professor. Corgan's early crop research ranged from peaches to potatoes, but in recent years, he has focused on onions.

Since his onion breeding program began to release new varieties, New Mexico's onion production has steadily increased from 3600 acres in 1981 to 8800 acres in 1990, and more than doubled in value. Yield per acre in New Mexico also increased more than 20 percent, or 150 sacks of onions per acre during that time period. NuMex BR1, NuMex Starlite, NuMex Sundial and NuMex Sunlite are some of the high-quality, high-yielding varieties bred by Corgan that gave area growers an economic boost.

Corgan works closely with the New Mexico Dry Onion Commission and other researchers to develop a series of low-pungency (sweet) onion varieties for the entire New Mexico harvest season. The goal is to provide a stimulus for economic growth by making the state's onion growers more versatile and competitive.

Corgan plans to release more advanced onion varieties over the next five years. These onions will be resistant to pink root

MORE

disease, have excellent handling qualities, and variable maturities.

The recipient of NMSU's College of Agriculture and Home Economics Distinguished Faculty Advisor award in 1980, Corgan was again recognized in 1987, when he was presented the Distinguished Research Award by the College.

Corgan, an alumnus of the University of Missouri, holds bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees in horticulture. Corgan served in the U.S. Army as an artillery officer for two years following his baccalaureate work. Corgan then worked as a graduate assistant and a junior faculty member of the University of Missouri's horticulture department before coming to NMSU.