

Interview with Meredith Abbott Brooks

R: Anyway my dad had an adventurous soul and I think he liked the idea of being 40 miles off the coast on a desolate island, he thought that was really going to be a good thing to do and raise sheep out there. I think he got the lease from the government and it was very inexpensive. I forget what the cost was but some say it was a dollar, some say it was the equivalent of paying a dollar lease for farming on an island, anyway ranching on an island. I think I don't know how he first heard about the island - probably through the Vail family who had Santa Rosa island at the time and I believe they also had a lot of acres in Arizona and that part of the world.

INT: Excellent. Did you have any sense of the vision, the concept of opportunity that your father saw with the island that encouraged him to go after the lease? Did he envision 20,000 sheep on the island with all that natural feed and and big market down the road in LA. Did you have any sense of his business opportunity that drew him to San Miguel.

R: I think the business opportunity was not only raising the lamb meat but also the wool because wool was very very important in the second world war for the uniforms and the first world war as well. But I think he thought that would be a good way to make a living. He also had jobs on mainland and this was something he did other than that as something extra. I think it was profitable. I know some years it wasn't if there was a

drought like there is now and there is no feed on the island and I think thats really really difficult. I know one year -and I don't know the date -he had to ship everything to San Nicholas. My son and I went to San Nicholas on a trip that we thought we would be able to paint but actually did a lot of sorting of middens and building walls and things like that for the island. And we found a place called Brooks Harbor out there and it was named after Daddy when he brought the sheep out from San Miguel to San Nichols because San Nicholas had gotten the monsoon water and had some feed on it. So I don't think it was always easy to make a living out there. I think there was a lot of struggle with bad years and such.

INT: Could you describe your fathers different activities in addition to his work on San Miguel island - he had a ranch here and a wattle shop there. What were the different activities that Mr. brooks had here in California once he came from the east?

R: He was farming with his brother on the imperial valley and that was hotter than the devil. He used to say its no place for a white man. He also later on worked for the federal land bank -so he was appraising land. He was also growing beans on I think it was like 250-300 acres in Oxnard and latter growing lemons down there. But he was always doing some kind of ranching. Then he bought the place here in Carpendreou (sp) which was 52 acres I believe and that was also dry beans at

first. I can remember in the fall when the Santana would start and the winds would start and the beans were all in rows and the winds would start and the beans would blow -farming is not a real secure situation. Anyway, he always had some ranching going on as well on the coast as well.

INT: Do you know the circumstances of where he first met Herb Lester. Did you ever talk to him about that? Or have you ever read material about that? How did you father first meet Herb Lester and did they hit it off and become friendly and make a pact to work together? Whats the story of their meeting and the growth of their relationship?

R: They meet in Walter Read Hospital after the first world war. They were both in the first world war. Herby was in quote "shell shocked"-he was wounded and daddy was also wounded. They met there and they had -I don't know where they were roommates or in a ward -but they were side by side and they started talking. I think daddy had this lease at the time which he had turned over to somebody else to manage while he was in the service and he started telling Herby about it and Herby being -I don't know whether to say he is a recluse or he needed to get away from civilization and bit and certainly thats a good place to get away from civilization. At some point daddy had talked about the island and after another job Herby had on the mainland I think daddy offered him the job on the island and he took it. Herby was an amazingly capable man for a situation like that. He

could fix anything, he could shoe a horse, he could butcher a lamb, he could sheer -I mean I am sure running that house which was beaten by the wind practically everyday -I think a lot of deterioration of the house which he had to feel going. I think he was terribly capable in that way, a very practical man.

INT: I have a sense as well that he was really quite a fine human. That he was devoted to his wife and children, that he expected nothing but a full life on the island just as they would have on the main land -school would be an example of that, his grading them. Could you talk about anything you know directly, or things you have heard from your dad or observations about Herb Lester as a human, what kind of man he was in addition to his practical capabilities on his island. Was herb lester able to keep a normal high standard of family living and love and life going on on the island.

R: I think so. There are many pictures of them sitting around in the evening and of course what was wonderful was there was practically no radio -only a two way radio every -finally later one but certainly there was no television or entertainment. So I think there was a lot of reading and a lot of story telling and a lot of sitting around in the evenings and enjoying each other which is almost a lost art. So that was probably a wonderful aspect of being out there.

INT: Can you talk about how Herb took hold of the island and pulled it together and got the operation running and really lead a successful lease for your father?

R: I don't know how much of that came from Herby and how much of that came from daddy. Now my father was only out there - say one month at a time, at certain times - like at sheering and and at lambing and when they were bringing the sheep in. The rest of the time I guess Herby was on his own except for some communications. There's lots of letters and lots of communications in that department - you know "can you fix that" or "this is down" something like that. But I don't know how much of that was instigated by Herby and how much of that was instigated by my father. But as a I say you couldn't live on such a place without an awful lot of where-with-all on how to do and how to fix.

INT: Can you follow up with a communications. How did your father and Herb communicate? Did they do it by mail? Was there a monthly visit? Did George Hammon bring instructions over? How did they keep communication back and forth?

R: Later on George Hammon brought mail and evidently ice cream for the kids and things that they needed that weren't shipped over because certainly in a small airplane you couldn't pack that much in. But there was no airport at first so that was later on. I don't know the year but at first everything came by boat and I am sure they waited for those boats to come.

Because it was not only the things that weren't there - sugar, flour, supplies for cooking and sustaining their family out there. I don't think there were chickens out there, so it must have been eggs and you cant bake without eggs and you know things like that -supplies. I know daddy would talk about -they would bring out bread and of course it would get as hard as a rock and so one of the tricks that I have even used is you dowse it in water and soak it and put it back in the oven. So I think instead of letting the bread get mildewy they let it get hard and dry.

INT: Do you recall any specific letters from your dad to Herb with any instructions or schedules? What time of communications would your dad write to herb -"I need this done" or "have you thought about that" or "are we getting the lands" Can you think of anything specific ones you have read ?

R: I can't. I can probably find them, but I couldn't come up with it right now.

INT: But you would say that the way they communicated was largely in writing?

R: Well Herb had beautiful handwriting so I remember seeing the letters that went back and forth. I think it was probably more to do what was coming next, whether it was shipping or lambing or what was the next adventure for them -and when daddy was coming.

INT: Do you have recollection of the closeness of their friendship. How your father felt about Herb. Did he ever ever talk to you about Herb? Do you have any information about it? Or how as Herbs tenure extended on the island how your father felt about him? How did your father feel about the island ranch manager?

R: I think he felt that he was very capable and doing a really wonderful job. But I also think -because I was talking to my son earlier this evening because he is the one that did awful lot of research on this for that article that I showed you -and my son felt the relationship was very much an employer - employee relationship as long as a long standing admiration for each other. When you are working for somebody its slightly different than a regular friendship.

INT: Id like to ask you that questions again and if we could avoid referencing the article and we could probably avoid referencing you son even -just did the research this morning. Just a more general answer one more time about how your father viewed Herb Lester as friend and as ranch manager and what their relationship was.

R: I think my father felt that Herby was doing a really very capable and good job of shepherding the island, shepherding the sheep. I think he admired his many many skills, whatever herby could do. I also think they were friends but they were also employee and employer. I don't know whether that is the

same kind of friendship you would have with somebody you didn't have that connection with.

INT: Excellent. Thank you. Do you have any specific stories that have delighted you, intrigued you or horrified you, whatever emotion about San Miguel? your dad and the Lesters or something Bestsy may have told you. Any San Miguel stories that are important to you that you could share?

R: There is a wonderful story that was told to me by Al Vail because a couple of times we tried to get to San Miguel and we couldn't because of the wind and we ended up on Santa Rosa with Al Vail. Al Vail told me that daddy used to come to Santa Barba and he would contact most of his shearers in bars and sometimes bail them out of the hoosegow and he would collect his shepherds and take them down to a house on lower state street and say to the perprietiast (sp) to keep these people here until 3 or 4 in the morning until I come to put them on the boat and take them to the island. I think it was Al Vail who called up my grandmother who was this very proper New York women and he said "So is Bob there?" and my grandmother said "Bob is in Santa Barba gathering his shepherds and what he was doing was actually bailing them out of jail. But anyway, thats one story. I remember when daddy got back from the islands he would be so sun burned and he would smell like Lan-il-en (SP) and that was a very strong memory and all his clothes for days -not all his clothes because they were washed. But I have his jacket that he

wore and its just a canvas jacket and I think it was so cold and bitterly windy that he layered everything and had this canvas jacket on top of everything. I have that. But I was a little kid when all of this was going on. I was 8 years old when the island was taken away from him. I don't have as many memories as I wish I did.

INT: Did you ever go out to san Miguel island with him?

R: No, no there was a chance I was going to go one time and then he said "No, its no place for little kids -I can't be babysitting you if I am working." I can understand that.

INT: Just to digress for a second. The Vails are a very important part of this film as well. Just as be have a real focus on San Miguel island we have a real focus on Santa Rosa island and their operation in particular. We have had a long talk with Tim Vail and have begun to discover some old footage of the ranging operation there. Do you have any other stories or comments about the Vails. Did you ever go out for a round up? Do you have any observations of island neighborliness other than the fact that put you up if you couldn't make it all the way? Anything you can about the Vails and Santa Rosa?

INT 2: We are going to wait for the airplane to go past, I apologize -

INT: There was an incident on San Miguel where your father was seriously injured. I think Herb Lester was credited with reacting about as well as anyone could react in that situation.

Could you tell us that story please. What happened to your Dad? What resources were available? How Herb dealt with it? What is the story of your fathers injury.

R: There are a couple of versions of this. But the one that we know is that every year they had to tear down and build the dock or the loading facilities for the sheep and my father slipped on a rock which is easy to do and put a bolt right up the bottom of his spine and they put him on a sled and dragged him up to the ranch house and Herby had to sew him up. So they fortified him with a lot of alcohol and I think they both fortified themselves with a lot of alcohol. Herby sowed up daddy a sac needle and a fishing line and then they went and flew the flag upside down. I believe at the time my month was about to give birth to my sister Whitney and she had some kind of a premonition that something was wrong out there. So she called up whoever was going out on the boat -whether it was Jimmy or Brooks -and said "get out there!" So they put him on a boat and took him to cottage hospital. The doctor took one look at his wound and said "This is amazing, I couldn't have done any better myself" and he wouldn't charge him. The story was he said "I have never seen a man come into the hospital wearing cotex before." But this was one of the things we heard. The doctor wouldn't send him a bill so Daddy sent him a case of whiskey I believe. Thats as much as I know. I know that he had to hit the

needle with a book to get it through. We have heard some pretty graphic descriptions of what happened.

INT: Thats a great story. Thats a great story

R: Unbelievable, isn't it?

INT: I think there is some documentation photographically isn't there?

INT 2: There is the needle and we have a the flag upside down.

INT: I think Herb wrote about it too or made sort of a journal or a diary -that plane causing a problem?

INT 2: Yeah we should leave.

INT: Look at me please. Last three or four questions at most. Can we talk about the post-Lester years. What went on on San Miguel Island in terms of your dad and the Brooks lease after 1942 when the Lesters left the island.

R: Daddy had hired different couples to go out there and stay and live. I am not sure any of them were as successful as the Herb Lester family.

INT: Do you mind starting with the question "After 1942 -"

R: Oh, after 1942 when the Lesters were gone I know that daddy had hired different couples to go out there and take care of the island. I don't think anybody last as long or did as well as Herby did. But there were two or three different couples that were there until the island was taken away from him.

INT: We are going to do that question again, but with particular emphasis on the end and having to get off the island so quickly. What happened to the island after the Lesters left and whats the story of your father getting word from the government that your father had to be off within 72 hours or whatever it was?

R: My father told until the end of the time that he had the island that he had exactly three days to clear off the island and that means emptying the ranch house, that means getting all the sheep off the island, all the above. He lost a tremendous amount of money because of that, because it was such an impossible feat. He had a lawsuit into Washington into years and years and years and I don't think anything ever happened of course. It was such a big an important part of his life that in some ways it caused him to kind of give up. I don't think he was ever the same after they took the island away from him. I think the same thing is true with the Vails. I think Al and Russ were devastated by having to get off the island and get the cattle off the island and for these guys it was such a big part of who they were and I think they hurt them badly to loose it, that part of their life. Its like a whole other room in his life just said "thats it."

INT: Did your father ever talk to you about Mr. Lester's decision to end his life on the island.

R: He didn't. I think probably what happened is he felt pretty helpless. I think he cut off two fingers and being that he was the kind of person he was just couldn't handle the incapacibilities that that created for him. I remember one time I broke my wrist and I couldn't even do up a button with one hand and so you forget how easy it is that we were given two hands and ten fingers and how hard it is when any of that is taken away. So that's all I know about that. I think he had huge infection from that and I think the drugs he took to get rid of the infection are part of what caused him to kill himself.

INT: Last questions. Do you and Bestsy Lester keep in touch and talk and share memories. What's your feeling about Besty, Marianne, Elizabeth and the life they had on that island.

R: Besty is wonderful and I do keep in touch with her and I love seeing her and we always try to sit together at the different events that we are involved in for the different islands. Dunken and I are on the island advisory board and -no she is pretty amazing and she is a wonderful tennis player as well. I don't know -I know that when Maryanne was here she was living in a house that Duneken's mother and uncle were born in on Villario Street and it had been turned into a sort of a rescue place for people who were not quite right in their heads and her roommate was somebody I went to school with. Is a very strange, small world department. But no we talk about that and

of course Besty is very solicitous of her niece who is Maryannes daughter who lives in Santa Barba as well.

INT: Ok, really the last questions. My last question. Today the legacy that your father shepherded for many many years out there that led him to feel gravely disappointed and empty at the end when it was just yanked from him -all we have is a barren island that is now closed to the public even though it is a national park. Do you have feelings about the current state of San Miguel and how the national park and the navy have conducted themselves vis-a-vis what went on in the 1800's and the first half of the 1900's? How do you feel about how San Miguel is being operated today?

R: I feel the closing of it for anybody is a little silly. Their excuse is that there are unexploded bombs and weaponry out there. We have been walking on that island for the last 30-40 years and I don't think anybody has stepped on anything that was questionable. So I don't know quite whats going on with the navy with the closing of the island. I think it's unfortunate.

INT 2: That was my questions, so were covered.

END OF INTERVIEW

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