**Archaeology and History in Your Backyard**

**The Story of Delmar Thomas – An early stunt rider &**

**Movie actor with the Wild Bill Hickok Show**

Hello Everyone! This is Archaeology and History in Your Back Yard and my name is Dixie. X 88.7 FM and the Torrance County Archaeological Society are pleased to bring you a series of programs designed to acquaint you, our listening audience with little known people, places and events that took place in the past, right here in your own back yard. For the most part, we will be covering interesting facts, stories and legends about the past, and people that lived right here in the Estancia Valley and surrounding areas in central New Mexico. Our goal is to inform, educate and possibly enlist your help in preserving and protecting our past.

Our show today will focus on early Mountainair resident Delmar Thomas—an early stunt rider and movie actor with the Wild Bill Hickok Show and others.

This program was written by Dixie Boyle and produced by Bill Simms. Thank you for joining us today.

When farms and ranches stopped producing during the dust bowl and depression years, many cowboys moved to Hollywood in order to find work. During these years, those in the movies were looking for men who could ride, rope and perform stunts on the backs of their horses. There was actually a demand for this type of actor in the 1920s through the 1950s.

Many cowboys decided to leave their ranches and see if they could find work, but planned on returning as soon as the depression ended. There were others who enjoyed the work and remained in Hollywood for the remainder of their working careers and made quite a name for themselves.

Delmar Thomas, an early resident of Mountainair often stated that he was more than likely born on a horse. In 1933, during the heart of the Great Depression, when Thomas was twelve years old his family moved to Mountainair.

When they first arrived in town, the family camped on pasture land west of town where the Rock Hotel is now located. They were able to kill enough rabbits and squirrels to survive. Thomas found extra work on farms and ranches in the area and later that year they moved to their own homestead near Round Top southeast of Mountainair.

Thomas wrote about his experiences in a memoir left behind. “In 1934 the year of the drought, I don’t think it rained six drops of water. We ate seed beans. Mom fed up a cup of dry beans for breakfast, found us a glass of water for lunch and then let them swell for dinner. Things did not get any better.

I worked in almost every store in Mountainair. I went to school, but I couldn’t even afford to pay attention. We accepted what we had and made the best of it. Those were fun times; everyone was poor, we didn’t know any different. I graduated from Mountainair High School in 1939 but left Mountainair because of my health. I was starving to death. We farmed that year and I was working on a repaving job on Route 60. Then that fall a big hail storm ruined everything, so, in 1940 I moved to California.”

Thomas’ fascinating memoir continues in his own words, “I went to work for cowboy star Wild Bill Elliott who had a serial under the name Wild Bill Hickok. I took care of the horses on the ranch and broke horses with him. I went with Bill on a personal appearance tour that covered 26 states in 13 weeks and when I got back to California I had had enough traveling. I had met stuntmen and decided I wanted to do stunt work. I had met cowboy star Tex Ritter. Wild Bill and Tex helped me make connections.

Years of horse work made this a lot easier, but I learned my stunt skills on the job. I doubled for Tadpole on the Gene Autry series and made movies with Roy Rogers. Because I was small, I doubled mostly for kids and women, and of course Mickey Rooney. I doubled for Gene Tierney riding a chariot in the Egyptian. Ms. Tierney came up to me on the set. I had on this long dress, a wig and boobs. She asked if I was properly dressed underneath. She pulled up my dress and saw boots and Wranglers. What should I be wearing I said and started pulling up her dress. . .but not very far!

I drove a chariot for Victor Mature in that movie. Others had scared him by telling him I wasn’t much of a horseman and he held on to that chariot for dear life. We were to crash into a crowd of actors. I put the brake on that chariot so quick. Mature didn’t blink an eye. He later gave those guys hell for telling him such a story.

When WWII came, Delmar was drafted and worked with pack mules in the military. When he returned to Hollywood, Delmar became a stunt legend and worked with such stars as Errol Flynn, Hopalong Cassidy, Fess Park, Doris Day, Robert Mitchum and Gary Cooper. He was a stunt regular on the TV program Gunsmoke.

Thomas added, “Horses were my main thing. I played millions of jockeys. I fell off horses and took some dangerous risks, but I never broke a bone or missed a day from being in the hospital.”

Thomas’ career lasted over twenty years and when he retired he decided to do something completely different and went into construction management. He retired when he did, because he realized it was time, as he had seen too many stunt men get seriously hurt when they refused to retire when they should have. He had a good long career and he wanted to keep it that way. In 1991, Delmar Thomas was inducted into the Hollywood Stuntmen’s Hall of Fame.

Thomas never forgot his hometown of Mountainair and his growing up years and often returned when in between shows to visit his friends and family. He enjoyed living in Hollywood and being a respected and much in demand stuntman for movies and television shows. Thomas’ years of riding and breaking horses came in handy when he found there was a demand for these skills in the movies.

During these years many cowboys from ranches throughout the west went to Hollywood to work in the movies. Many became quite famous and remained in Hollywood the remainder of their lives while others only made enough money to support their families and then returned to their ranch or farm. Their skills in handling horses and livestock made many of these cowboys famous.

This has been Archaeology and History in Your Back Yard, a series that will take you through our area’s history in future episodes.

The Torrance County Archaeological Society meets at 7 PM the first Tuesday of every month from March through November. We meet at the East Torrance Soil and Water Education Building at 700 S. 10th Street in Estancia. Please come and join us.

You can listen to Archaeology and History in Your Own Back yard Tuesday at 7 PM and Saturday at 4 PM. Thanks for listening!

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