

Extension Oral History Project – Roberta Anderson – Part 2

Date: August 26, 2007

Place: Roberta Anderson's home, Pendleton, Oregon

Time: 36:12 minutes

Interviewer: Elizabeth Uhlig, Oral Historian

Transcriber: Sue Bowman

[Time - 0:00]

Elizabeth Uhlig: This is part two of the interview with Roberta Anderson.

So, Roberta, you moved to Corvallis to take a position with the Extension Service. What was your job title?

Roberta Anderson: Well, I was Family Life Specialist with the Extension Service.

EU: This was in the Home Ec...

RA: This was in the Home Ec section of the Extension Service. At that time, it wasn't considered so much being a part of the department of Family Life as it was Extension Family Life Specialist. So that I worked directly with the Extension Service in developing programs for issues in the area of family life, children responsibilities and social issues.

EU: Where was your office?

RA: My office was in the home economics building – we were, across the street from Extension Hall and most of the ag people were either in the departments, or housed with the departments, or in Extension Hall on the other side of the street.

EU: But your supervisor you reported to...

RA: Her office—we had one wing of the Home Economics Building—and we had our offices there. Esther Taskerud was our supervisor and she was there; although, she was on the administrative group of Extension. But she had her office with us and we had home economics supervisors, Extension supervisors, and each district of the state was divided so that they had a home economics supervisor in the district as well as a county agent who supervised the total programs.

EU: So, Esther Taskerud was the director of Home Economics, Extension, and she was also Assistant Director of the whole Extension Service. What was it like working for her?

RA: Well, she was a wonderful person to work with. I think a very special person in terms of the way she could make anybody feel that you were very important and that you had a lot to offer and that you could do anything. And I think she developed a staff that did things we didn't know we could do because Esther had faith in us and thought we could do these things and so we weren't afraid to try things and maybe fail at them. But at least we were willing to try things.

She developed a personal relationship – I know my children considered her a part of the family and she often shared Christmas with us and Thanksgiving and they felt very close to her.

So she was the supervisor. The program was based in the counties, and we worked with planning groups within each county to find out what it was that people were interested in. We didn't go into schools but each specialist would list some things they saw as issues and maybe things that the people hadn't thought about. And often, they thought of things that we hadn't thought about. And I know I was overwhelmed a few times when they wanted us to study topics that I thought, "oh, I just can't possibly develop a study guide for this," but we did.

[4:25]

EU: Did you do a lot of travelling then ... into the different counties?

RA: A lot of traveling into the counties. Some weeks I was away almost all week and maybe a week a month I was home all the time. But otherwise I was travelling in the counties, and I managed to work in every county in the state while I was there.

EU: Did you travel by yourself, or did you go with others?

RA: Well, it depended. If it was a 4-H program for example, we might have leader training for 4-H, so you would go with the 4-H staff. And if I was doing something relating to child development, I would go work with them; so there might be a group of us traveling. And usually some of the supervisors and frequently there would be one or two carloads of people going and working in the county to do some special kind of meeting. We would usually be there for two or three days or maybe one or two days and move on to another county. So it was a lot of traveling. And, at that time, we worked Saturday mornings, too, so often we didn't get back until late Friday night or sometimes Saturday morning, and then we did our office work in between.

[6:00]

EU: You must have formed strong friendships, then with your colleagues and with Esther.

RA: With all of the colleagues. I think the Extension people tend to be very warm, friendly, and outgoing because they like people. And I always felt that anyplace I was in the United States that, if I got into trouble, I could call on the county agent. And that we were part of a group that was responsible for one another and I think we worked together so closely that we developed lots of real close friendships.

EU: I would imagine the mentoring, for example, what Esther Taskerud did was important for you as a woman, because there weren't many opportunities for women at that time, were there?

[6:54]

RA: Well, there were in the counties because there was a home agent in each county, at least one and 4-H might have women in that program. But the county agents themselves were always men. Then on the staff in the home economics profession, there were some men in the family life field and some in nutrition, but most of the people when I was there were women in that field so they could get jobs in that field. So it provided more jobs for women than some other areas.

EU: What were some of the other areas? You were the family life specialist; there was foods and nutrition....

RA: Foods and nutrition, clothing, home management, family finance, recreation. Let's see, what else have I left out? I think that was the main staff we had. And then in our building we also had the home economics supervisors who were divided into the three supervisors that worked with the men in the county supervision program.

EU: So, when you worked with the 4-H or the Extension agents out in the counties, what kinds of programs ... exactly did you do? You presented programs to them, you talked a little about how they would come up with suggestions on issues that they wanted you to address. How did that all work?

[8:52]

RA: Well, usually the specialists would have some ideas, for example, I thought social issues were of major concern to families even though they might not realize it. They could learn about child development and teaching your children and how they learned, and which were the important years, what kind of learning. And then I had started as a base, what we called a "Family Life Cycle" approach to family living. Which stage of the family you were in whether it was early marriage or mid-marriage or later years, the child rearing part or retirement. These were all areas within the family that we might study.

And then some of the things about children, we talked about the guidance of children and so we worked in different ways. One way, each specialist did news tips and we would do maybe three, four or five a month and these were sent to the agents in the county which gave them information about this specific subject to broaden their background perhaps. And they could use that as a newspaper story or most of them had radio programs and they could use that as a complete story by itself. It was always quoting the family life specialist, for example, or the nutrition specialist. But the agent, if they felt comfortable with the idea and this was something they knew about and could answer questions about, they could insert their own name. So this was part of our agent training which was ongoing.

And then we taught through the Home Extension clubs and every county had groups of women in their Extension clubs, they might have several clubs in one county. And these, I think, were one of the most innovative parts of the Extension program because these were groups where the women were taught to be the leaders of the group and to use the subject matter within the group, which was a wonderful way of developing the individual leaders. And so, as specialists, we would write material for them and we usually had a procedure for how they would do the meeting, how they might do flannel boards or bulletins boards and questions they could ask the people and have them fill out questionnaires to get them involved in the meeting. In Family Life, some of the topics were a little difficult for the agents and the homemakers because they didn't feel too secure about them.

[12:20]

EU: Because they were sensitive issues?

RA: Sensitive issues and ones people didn't always talk about and they were issues that usually didn't have just one right answer, as most things. I had developed a program on widowhood, which the agents were going to do. I think this was one of the early projects. Then we would do agent training in Corvallis. The agents would come in that were going to have this subject in their county. So we would train the agents and then they would go out and train the leaders. In my field, the agents often didn't feel

real comfortable with this because they had specialized more in clothing, and nutrition, etc.

And so we had done this and the agent in Multnomah County, had hundreds of clubs practically, called and she just didn't feel comfortable teaching it and so I wasn't able to go and meet with all these groups, but I got the idea of developing the part that the leader would ordinarily say in the meeting and that I would come on a phonograph record (we started with phonograph records then). And in the program it would be a time when they could play this record that had my voice on it and then it would lead into questions or discussion. So, that worked out very well in Multnomah County so we started doing it for a number of different kinds of lessons.

[14:12]

EU: So that was an innovation, using the media like that.

RA: I think so.

EU: Today it would be PowerPoint or the internet presentation or something.

RA: So that was our beginning.

EU: And it was through these types of efforts then that this leadership training became very important to women who normally wouldn't have spoken in front of groups.

RA: I think that was, to me, one of the important things – to watch how the women developed in their ability to make presentations and to teach subjects they weren't familiar with. And so it involved simplifying a lot of very complicated subjects and it seemed to be one of the things that I was able to do.

EU: When we were talking before you mentioned about a woman to testify in front of the Legislature?

RA: Yes, we were having trouble with budgets for Extension. This was many years ago; it would have been in the '60s. And when she gave her testimony she told about how she had learned in Extension that she hadn't been able to do this kind of thing. I'm not sure whether she had actually graduated from high school, or had just graduated, but a "simple farm girl" she said, raised on the farm and "now here I am and I can stand before you and speak." She attributed it to her experiences with Extension leaders training.

And I always felt that was one of the great strengths of Extension, getting people to think outside the things they usually thought about and what I would try to do when social issues were developing during the 60s – that was the time of rebellion and so much emphasis on it, that we could develop some of these groups they could do. For example, drugs were just starting on the campuses. We knew that they would be spreading to the city high school kids and then to the non-urban kids and so we tried to be ahead of that movement and develop programs that would help them understand how they might cope with that.

[16:59]

EU: In one of the papers that you showed me was a nomination for, I'm not sure quite what, but in there you talked about how you were able to be responsive to these various social changes that were going on and you were able to challenge people with societal and familial issues. Could you talk a little bit more in the context of the '60s and the beginning of the women's' movement and some of the issues that were particularly sensitive.

RA: Well, yes. Among many others, sex education was coming to the front in those years of the '60s, which is a very sensitive subject. And I did develop some teaching materials on that, and I did workshops and meetings throughout the counties with people on what their children knew and what they needed to know. And at the same time nationally, there was a group very opposed to sex education and a lot of family life education because they thought that was not anybody's business but the family's or the

church's so there was quite a bit of, in fact even a national movement, that developed against any kind of sex education.

EU: Was this the involvement of the John Birch Society?

RA: That was the main group who was out really working on it. And they had a program nationwide and I had been going to these national meetings and hearing some of the things that they did and there were certain questions they always asked at these meetings they attended. And they objected to movies and one thing and another. And so we did a lot of work on that. Most of the time, the people were very receptive and accepting and felt that it was a very worthwhile program.

We had a couple of times in one county, someone was there to attend the meeting and they asked just the questions that were being asked all over the country so I knew where they were coming from and we managed that. But they also got on talk radio and said I had shown a sex education film, pornographic film to the group and I had not shown any film to the group, so that was handled very well in the county, but you didn't ever have a chance to respond to the same people that were listening to that program particularly at that time. So it was an interesting time.

[20:25]

EU: That happened here in Pendleton?

RA: Oh yes, we had a little incident here in Pendleton where I was at a meeting the schools had asked me to do for teachers on sex education. And the meeting went very well. but at that meeting and at other meetings I had done with people who were wanting to train others, was to give them some background information on where kids were today – that day – in their thinking. And there had been a research study done that had asked kids a lot of questions and then gave the summary of their answers and I had made copies of this that I used just with teachers groups. I didn't feel it was appropriate to be used with families or in other public meetings. Usually, I kept track of my number of papers so that I got back the same number I had let them look at. But

apparently, I overlooked a questionnaire and I think a teacher must have reprinted it or something. And so it was inappropriate but it got on the TV. But the agent did a real good job handling it and the supervisors, the county agent, and of course I reported it immediately to our director so they knew what had actually happened and it was inappropriate material that was released. So people had a right – I think some ministers were very concerned about it and they had a right to be. But it's amazing that is really the only major flick that I had in all the different subjects that we talked about. Because we talked about illegitimacy and solutions to pregnancy out of wedlock and a lot of things like that parents were interested in.

[22:55]

EU: So you developed materials, then, for teaching...

RA: ...sex education to children. A lot of it I did myself in terms of meetings, but we also developed a group for leaders to do.

EU: The programs you developed that were picked up nationwide...

RA: Some of them were...

EU: Some of them were...so this impact you had spread much beyond Oregon.

RA: Yes, and I have for example, in Washington they asked me to do some in the Education Department for their teachers and their supervisor. And so I think except for that one organization and the one error that we made in getting the material out, otherwise we didn't have any major questions about all of this sensitive material.

EU: And I think you were recognized nationally, given a national award for your materials?

RA: For two, I was given the Burgess Award for Family Life Educator for the creative programming I had done. And then a Superior Service Award from US Department of Agriculture. So I was recognized for the work I had done.

EU: Had you gone to Washington for various conferences?

RA: Yes, I had been invited to the White House Conference on Aging...that was in 1960. I think I attended that before I came to Oregon and then I did a couple of different White House conferences when I was in Extension representing the Federal Extension Service. I attended one on children and youth and aging. I can't think of the others right now but I was privileged to attend those. And then I was always active in the National Family Life Conference and so that we got lots of information from their research studies. It was pretty largely research based so that was one source of my information and then the child development national groups, too.

[25:44]

EU: Could you talk a little bit about some of the other materials and programs you were involved with? I have down in my notes about the mini-college?

RA: Oh, yes. Extension did a mini college for women who were involved in Extension and I know I did one session on listening. I think I may have done something on communication and at different times almost every year, I participated in some way in the mini-college. Well, I did quite a bit of work for PTAs. They asked me to speak at different PTAs, and I would do that. And we did news tips; I think I talked about that before. And different agent trainings. I worked with the 4-H.

[26:50]

EU: Could you talk a little bit about the mini-lessons. These were short, ten-minute lessons for the county agents?

RA: Yes. There was a request for instead of having a whole meeting devoted to family life, to include it, for example, with something on nutrition or home management or something. And so we developed a series of ten-minute lessons that could be given

during the meeting and made those available to the different county groups. They seemed to be quite well accepted. We did those on communication and I don't remember all the others, offhand. Child guidance and family life cycle, I think. There were quite a few mini-lessons we developed that related mainly to child guidance and to developing responsibility in young children, understanding teenagers, children's toys, understanding behavior, and so forth. I had quite a list of different lessons. Not every county took all the lessons at any one time, so at any one time a county could choose from probably fifteen possible lessons in the family life field if they wanted them in their group, so there was quite a few things available.

EU: How did you come up with these different topics? Were these topics that you developed or you got input from the counties? How did that work?

[28:35]

RA: Well, sometimes there were things that I proposed knowing what families needed. Like developing responsibility in children – parents are concerned, how do you develop that? And so we brought that forth, they would say, yes, that's something we would like to study. And then I would pull together some research—it was all based on research—our mission as Extension people was to take the research out from the Land Grant colleges to the people. Which meant that you had to reinterpret, present the research in a way that people could understand it. And so that's what all of our lessons were based on – research and understanding of a problem or a situation. It wasn't just out of our heads.

EU: So in addition to this academic research you did, you must have had your ears open to what was going on in society, things that you could...

RA: Yes, reading the papers and knowing what was happening on the college scene and knowing that for the young people there it usually filtered down to the lower levels of school.

EU: And did you draw upon your own family experiences sometimes?

RA: Oh, yes [chuckle]. I think they helped me a lot to see how life really goes along.

EU: You showed me one of your programs there, based on your experience with your daughter?

RA: Well, yes. Now that she's a retired person, she probably wouldn't mind me telling this story using her name. One night I came home from work, and we had had a little problem with her coming home and rushing in to tell something and leaving her bicycle on the steps so that it was difficult to get up the steps. So this night, she had come home, and she had been thinking, I'm sure, about her mother and so she had thought that she wanted to write a note for me, and put it up on; we always had a blackboard in the kitchen where we could put notes, so it was the first thing you saw when you came home.

And so she had rushed home from school, riding her bicycle and she had written on the blackboard, "I love you, Mommy." Then I came home from work later, tired from a busy day and here was this bicycle all over the back porch steps. And when I entered the house, I called to her something about "can't you pick up your bicycle and how difficult it was and I've told you a million times to pick it up" – all the things that I wasn't supposed to say, but I had done. And then I looked up and saw this message on the board so I felt very chagrined but here she had been thinking nice thoughts of me and really eager to get home and write that on the board and all I had done was be cross with her for leaving her bicycle. And so I tried to make amends. And she didn't remember it. She said I was sorry about it the other day. So she doesn't remember it, so I must have made amends.

[32:40]

EU: And so how did you work that into one of the lessons?

RA: I think it was on showing care, was the lesson – how you show children that you really do love them and you do care for them. We expect them to know that from all the

things we do, but sometimes they don't. So this was one of the things showing you care – that when you make mistakes you try to make amends for them and that you are thinking about different ways of telling them that you love them – that they have done a fine job on something or other, instead of just criticizing them for the things they don't get done – to emphasize the things they have done and the nice things they've done and it does make a difference.

EU: Was it an advantage, or did it give you more credibility because you were married and you had children and so you could teach about the family cycle and family events, family issues from your own experience? Did that give you more credibility?

RA: I think it did. I know one time I was doing a meeting in one county and this woman came up beforehand and said, "I just wanted to know, do you have any children?" And I said, "Yes, I've raised three children." "Okay," she said, "I'll stay for the meeting, but I wasn't going to listen to anyone who hadn't had children." So I think it did and I frequently used reference to my children so people knew that I had some experience with children. And I think that makes a lot of difference in the minds of people. But actually, people without children can be very knowledgeable if they have studied about it and do an excellent job of teaching. But it's just something that is in the mind of people.

[34:40]

Like the farmer doesn't want to just listen to this young fellow from the ag college and I think in agriculture they did very well. Well, that was part of the reason why 4-H was formed because parents wouldn't take the word from some young fellow from the ag college, but if the children learned it in 4-H and they saw that it worked. I think one of the factors in developing 4-H as I recall, way back in, what was it, 1914 or so, was that you teach the kids and then the skeptical farmers can see. Or they had, I know in my husband's county years ago, he had, I've forgotten what he called the, key farmers, or something like that, so that if he had some ideas that he thought were good and would help them in their enterprise, then if he got these farmers to accept it then other farmers would follow suit. So he always had his key leaders that he worked with. And I think, I

presume Extension still does that sort of thing, although I don't know. It's been over thirty years since I was out in the field.

EU: This is the end of Part 2.