

Extension Oral History Project – Alberta Johnston - Part 1

Date: October 13, 2007

Place: Alberta's apartment in Corvallis

Time: 38:23 minutes

Interviewer: Elizabeth Uhlig, Oral Historian

Transcriber: Sue Bowman

[0:00 minutes]

EU: This is an oral history interview with Alberta Johnston for the Extension Service at Oregon State University. Today is October 13, 2007, and we're at Alberta's apartment in Corvallis.

[00:18]

EU: Alberta, to start with, could you tell me where you were born and where you grew up?

AJ: I was born near Hickman, Nebraska. And I went to school in Hickman from my first grade to graduation.

EU: Graduation of high school?

AJ: Yes. In one building. It was a small town, small school.

EU: What part of Nebraska was that?

AJ: About 20 miles outside of Lincoln, Nebraska.

EU: What did your parents do?

AJ: My father was a farmer and my mother was a homemaker. Although my mother died when I was two so I do not remember her. I grew up with my father and an aunt and an uncle.

[1:10]

EU: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

AJ: I had two sisters. One was 12 years older than I was, and the other was two years older than I was. My older sister was nurse, and my other sister was a teacher. We went to school together, we went through college together.

EU: When you were a child, were you involved with 4-H activities?

AJ: No. I was a Campfire Girl. 4-H was not something that we had in the community where I grew up, and it was kind of interesting because Nebraska does have a strong 4-H program, but we didn't have it in Hickman.

EU: So the school you went to was very small, you said?

AJ: Yes, there were about 15 people in my graduating class. So I knew everybody. It was a small town.

EU: So, did you live out on the farm?

AJ: No, after my mother died we lived in town. And my father continued to work on the farm.

[2:25]

EU: When you were growing up, did you always know that you would go to college?

AJ: Oh yes, that was one thing my father insisted that Dorothy and I both go to college. Alice wanted to be a nurse and he certainly gave us a lot of help in getting through school. He was very interested in us having an education.

EU: So all three of you children....did he or your mother have advanced education?

AJ: No. I don't know why my father was so intent on us getting an education. At one point he said to me, "You know, I'm not going to leave you a lot of money, but I'm going to give you a good education and so you can take care of yourself." And I think that was good idea.

EU: So you and your sister, you went to the University of Nebraska?

AJ: Yes, we both went to the University of Nebraska. She went to Wesleyan University and when I graduated she moved over to the University of Nebraska and so we went to school together. And she then at that point then went into Home Economics and so we were both in the School of Home Economics.

[3:48]

EU: How did you choose Home Ec rather than nursing or teaching or...

AJ: You know, I really don't know. It was something I just thought would be fun to do and I liked a lot of things about homemaking and that kind of thing and I thought it would be a good experience for me. And I think it was the right choice. There were parts of Home Economics I didn't like, particularly the sewing part; I didn't like sewing and clothing construction, but I liked the science and I liked the foods and the economics; the kinds of things that families have to make decisions about. Because that was the area that I became interested in as I went through my career and went on for my Master's.

EU: So when you were studying at the university you had a wide curriculum.

AJ: Yes, I did. I was going to be a teacher in Home Economics and I started out as a Home Ec teacher in Nebraska. I taught for four years before I went into Extension.

EU: Where did you teach?

AJ: I taught in Lewiston, Nebraska; I taught in Lewisville, Nebraska, and I taught in Beatrice, Nebraska. I didn't stay in one school very long. When I taught in Beatrice, I was teaching seventh and eighth graders and I did not like that. So that's when I decided I wasn't going to be a teacher any longer.

EU: So, what did you teach in Home Ec, then?

AJ: I taught the whole curriculum. I was the only teacher in Home Ec.

EU: Okay, so you taught sewing and cooking...

AJ: Yes, I did the whole thing. But in the other schools, I taught in high school and I did teach some science classes in high school as well as Home Economics in high school. I taught Chemistry and Physics.

EU: But you said you knew then you didn't want to continue teaching?

AJ: And it's very interesting because now I like working with that age group. But I did not like working with the age group when I was teaching. I really didn't. It wasn't a good year for me.

[6:25]

EU: So how did you get involved with the Extension Service?

AJ: I was married and moved to Wyoming and that's when I got my first job in Extension. Where I was living they were looking for a home economist in Extension so I decided I would apply, so I did and started working in Extension then.

EU: Where was that?

AJ: It was in Thermopolis, Wyoming. And I was there several years. I was divorced then I moved to Buffalo and then I moved into Laramie and started working on the state staff and that was within about seven years.

EU: So your first positions in Thermopolis and Buffalo, was that as a home ec county agent?

AJ: Home Ec and 4-H.

EU: Both?

AJ: In Wyoming they had two agents – one was Agriculture and one was Home Ec and we both did 4-H.

EU: How long were you in those positions?

AJ: I worked in county positions six years; then went back to...then I got my Master's and then I went to Laramie as a specialist.

[7:45]

EU: Where did you get your Master's degree?

AJ: Kansas State in Manhattan.

EU: Why did you go there and what did you study there?

AJ: I went there because the person who was the head of Extension in Home Economics was a good friend of mine. She had been my boss, so to speak, when I was in Wyoming, and I decided I would like to go to school and study under her, which I did. Some of my classes were with her. And my field then became Economics and Family Economics and Consumer Education, those kinds of things. So I got a degree ... my Master's was in both Economics and Home Economics.

[8:40]

And I had a really interesting experience when I was in school because I lived in the home management house and I was the person who taught the kids... I don't know if you know what a home management house is?

EU: No, I've never heard of that.

AJ: Well, we had about eight students at a time in the home management house and they took care of the house and they did the cooking and cleaning and all the kinds of things that homemakers have to do those eight girls did. And I helped them get through their six weeks in the home management house. And then a new group would come in and I would do the same thing over again. It was really a good experience and financially it was a good idea too because I had my room and board and I had a nice apartment to live in and I got to know a lot of the kids in college who were seniors in college and so it was a good experience. Some of the things that happened in home management house were funny.

I remember going into the kitchen one day and the person was trying to mash sweet potatoes and they were using a whisk and they did it too fast and I got it right in my face. And the girl was sure I was going to fail her in the home management house. You know it was a good experience. That's when I played a lot of bridge, which I'm still doing. Some of the girls wanted to learn to play bridge, so I taught them how to play bridge in the evening.

[10:40]

EU: When did you get your degree there?

AJ: In the '60s.

EU: When I think of the '60s, I think of the women's movement and the Civil Rights movements and Vietnam.

AJ: Did I grow up through that? Yes, I did.

EU: Did that impact, I mean living with the women in the house...

AJ: Well, I've always felt that women are equal to men. And I don't think I was ever in a position where people did not respect me as a woman. But I certainly was wanting to make sure that women were being treated equally. It was important to me, but I never had that feeling that I wasn't. I don't know why. Maybe because a lot of my nurturing was with my father, and I think that may have made a difference.

EU: When I interviewed Jane Schroeder or Roberta Anderson, all from small rural towns in Nebraska or Kansas. Roberta was from Washington outside of Walla Walla, but all of you put yourselves through college. Education was important for the family and so is there something coming out of rural America? I don't know?

AJ: Sure, I think small towns had the culture of wanting their children to be educated. At least they did in the town that I lived in. It was an important value of most of the people in the community. Not everybody went to college, but they did other kinds of things. But as I said it was just a part of me that I knew I was going to college. Nobody ever told me that I wasn't going to college.

EU: Or that you couldn't.

AJ: But my family did help me through college. I did some work but I didn't have to work to go to college.

[13:25]

EU: What was it like living in Wyoming, for example, in the 50s – 60s? Did you enjoy it?

AJ: Oh yes, Wyoming was a great place to learn Extension. It really was. The staff was small; we were very much a family, and we had good leadership in the people that

were working on the state level and as I said, one of the reasons I went to college was because **May Baird** who worked in Wyoming, went to Kansas and she was working with some of the programs there and when I wanted to go to school she suggested coming to Kansas and she helped me get a job when I went there. It was a very small community, and we did a lot of things together as a group. It was just like having another family.

EU: What kinds of programs did you have there in Wyoming?

AJ: In Wyoming I did food preparation, I did clothing construction, as I said, wasn't my favorite part, and I organized 4-H groups, I worked with study groups, the home ec study groups. One of the things that I learned to do there was to work with the public in trying to plan what was important to them – what were their needs in the area that I could help them with. And I thoroughly enjoyed working through the process of how do you decide what to teach your study groups, for example?

[15:30]

EU: How did that process work, then?

AJ: We would get a group of homemakers together. And when I was in Wyoming the first time I had a group of women to plan programs, I invited them into my home and we had lunch and we sat down and talked and then we just had a really good time. They responded well to the idea of trying to think about things that were going to be important to them now and also in the future. And that's when a lot of them talked about their need for education in the use of money. You know, how do you use credit, how do you budget, what about investments, insurance, all of those areas I worked in were things that they were really interested in. I didn't do as much clothing construction in those days – other agents did! When I did a lot of my training in clothing construction, I would have the specialist come in and do it for me.

[16:40]

EU: This consumer education was that for personal or was it because they were ranch wives or farmers?

AJ: They were concerned with making the best use of what they had. Sometimes they didn't have a lot of money but they also had other kinds of resources. When I was working in Buffalo, I said I always thought the people that lived on farms and ranches there didn't think I was making enough money to feed myself. When I would go out to their homes to do a lesson they would send food home with me. Steaks and eggs and butter and all those good things that they were raising. And you get very close to people when you work in Home Economics in Extension in a small community. You are just a very important part of the community.

EU: And so then you were the liaison then with the state Extension and specialists come down then from...?

AJ: Well, you planned your program after you did in the county all the home agents got together and we worked with the specialists to see what the specialists could help us do and what we had to do for ourselves. And that was true when I came to Oregon.

[18:10]

EU: So that must have been good training for the rest of your career?

AJ: Oh yes, I really learned a lot about Extension and because the staff was small, I understood what the ag agents were doing as well as what Home Economics was doing because I worked very closely with the ag agent and we did programs together. In one of the counties for two years we had a large desk with a person on either side. The county agent sat on one side and I sat on the other. That was not the most comfortable ...because sometimes you didn't really didn't want the county agent to hear what you were talking to women about. But anyway, it was a very closeknit group, it really was and the same thing was true...I only worked a couple years in Montana.

EU: Where did you work in Montana?

AJ: I worked out of Bozeman. There I worked primarily in home management and one of the agents in farm management and I used to do meetings for families – husband and wife. We would talk about farm management and home management and how they meshed and how they worked together. And that was the area that I was really interested in.

EU: So it seems that became your specialty, then?

AJ: Yes.

[19:45]

EU: But at the same time then you were going to graduate school

AJ: It was after my graduate school that I worked on the state level. In Wyoming I did very much the same thing that I did in Montana. I worked in farm and home management. And it was interesting to work with couples rather than just the homemaker trying to see how the income from the farm was managed for the family. And it was, as I said, a good experience.

EU: Was that a common program? I mean where the husband and wife ... you would put together the home and farm management?

AJ: No, that was something that we tried during that period of time in all of the states they did that kind of programming at least a lot of states, because when we did national training we would work in farm and home management together.

[21:00]

EU: How did you come to Oregon, then? How did you get the job here at Corvallis?

AJ: Well, when I was working in Montana, I went to a regional meeting and met some of the staff from Oregon and when we were leaving the meeting two or three of them came up to me and said, "Alberta, why don't you apply for a job in Oregon? We'd like to have you here." And so I called Esther Taskerud who was the program leader for Home

Economics here and she asked me if I would send her a resume, which I did. I went to a national meeting in Washington D.C. and she was there and she interviewed me while we were there and after we talked, she said “I think you need to have breakfast with the Director of Extension, too, while we’re here. So we had breakfast and he talked to me and when we left, he said...

EU: That was Mr. Ballard, then?

AJ: No, that was Gene Lear and he said, “Do you want to move to Oregon?” And I said, “Yes, I think I would like to move to Oregon.” He said, “Okay, you have a job.”

EU: Just like that.

AJ: And I never came to Corvallis and the day I came to Corvallis, Esther met me in Portland to bring me down here and I was driving in, and I thought, “What am I doing with myself knowing nobody in Corvallis?” I had not met the staff; I didn’t know anyone and I came from a place where I knew everyone. But it worked okay. It was a good experience. Esther was a great mentor for me. She was the kind of person that I wanted to be. She was a real caring person.

[23:10]

EU: After I interviewed Roberta [Anderson], she mailed me a list of “Taskerisms” or something? Funny sayings she would twist words, or something.

AJ: She had that ability to make people work together and that was true was in Home Economics. The team of people who were working in Home Economics worked together. We did a lot of planning together, we did training together, and we did a lot of things together.

EU: It seems there was a strong ethic of being a mentor. I mean women helped you in your position. Did that continue on when you were here in Corvallis and you were able to help other women?

AJ: Oh sure. And you know interestingly enough, a lot of men said I was their mentor when I was here in Corvallis. I was the person they looked to when I was in administration. They came to me with their questions and concerns. And just the other day, Hank Wadsworth, who was the Director of Extension here for a period of time and he was the person who hired me when I started in administration and I was saying to him, that you know, you really were a mentor to me and he said, "Alberta, you were my mentor." He said, "You were my rock when I was here." But I think it's the way listen to people and how you respond to people is important because that was one of the things I think I do well, listen to people's concern and try to help them.

[25:20]

EU: It just seems to be one of the strengths of the Extension Service – the strong ties between colleagues and friendships.

AJ: And when you know somebody in Extension, they are your friend for life.

[25:40]

EU: What position were you hired for in Oregon? What did you do?

AJ: I was a specialist in Home Economics and again I taught home management. Here we did not work in farm and home management. I worked entirely with homemakers' groups.

EU: You weren't at the county level? You were here?

AJ: Yes, I came to Corvallis and I was on the state staff when I came here. I was a specialist and my title was Specialist in Home Economics, in Home Management.

EU: So you were a liaison then with the county agents? Throughout the state?

AJ: Yes, all over the state. I worked with Jane. And when you talked to her ...

EU: Jane Schroeder?

AJ: Yes. No, I worked with all the staff in Home Economics but I did things other than Home Economics I think. I became very interested in the consumer movement when I was here. And I was interested in how families got information about consumer decisions and that kind of thing.

[27:15]

And I worked with a group and we organized what was called the “Oregon Consumer League.” It became an advocate group for consumers in Oregon, and it became part of the national consumer movement.

EU: When you say, “we”, who did you, work with organizing the Oregon Consumers’ League?

AJ: I worked with teachers, I worked with attorney, I worked with people in the insurance field; there were all the kinds of fields that families had to make decisions about became a part of the Consumer League.

EU: Did you organize periodical meetings then? I mean bring the people together?

AJ: Yes, we met and we had special meetings when we would invite the public in to hear things. We brought in national speakers occasionally in the area of consumer education. I was one of the charter members of that organization and it’s still going but not as strong as when I was...I don’t think people have that same intense interest as they did then in the consumer field. But part of my feeling about that came from my Master’s program and my major professor because he was very interested in consumer problems and he worked on the national level. So I got interested in doing those kinds of things and he encouraged me to start a Consumer League in Oregon.

EU: Did you work with the state Legislature?

AJ: Some of the consumer field did work with the state Legislature. There are certain things as an Extension person that you don't do – you don't work with the Legislature unless they ask you and the people in the League where the kinds of people who wanted to work with the Legislature. I helped them get prepared for the legislative groups but I didn't necessarily work with the Legislature.

[29:35]

And the other thing that I did, I've talked a little bit about study groups...

EU: Could you talk about that a little bit more?

AJ: Sure. Extension homemakers were organized here in Oregon into what they called "Extension homemaker groups. And in each county they had a county committee who worked with the area planning programs for their study groups or Extension study groups. It was a very strong organization here in Oregon. There were probably 12,000 homemakers organized into study groups in Oregon at one point and their job was to help the Extension staff on the state level and on the county level decide what kind of programs should we be developing to help them. They had a very strong organization on the state level and Esther [Taskerud], after I had been here several years asked me to work with them on the state level and again, this was one thing I enjoyed doing, was working with volunteers and it's been one of my joys being in Extension, being able to work with volunteers.

And they had a national organization of Extension homemakers, and I as I went through my time here in Oregon I helped the group with the planning for their national meeting that they held in Oregon. Somebody asked me what that was like and I said, "Trying to keep 1400 women happy was really a chore." But I had good committees, I had a lot of people helping me, and we had a very successful meeting in Oregon. We made enough money that they are still using some of the money that we made with their little organization that they have now.

We don't have that relationship with study groups and Extension homemakers groups like we did when I was there. We felt responsible for making sure they got the right information about things they needed and we worked very closely with them and we worked closely with the faculty at Oregon State to make sure we were getting the right information. They helped us with writing bulletins and writing out materials and in preparing our lessons for homemakers. But they don't do that anymore.

[32:42]

EU: Because you were working mainly with the agents, or did you actually work with the study groups? The volunteer women themselves?

AJ: Sometimes we did; sometimes we would go out and train the women, train the people who were going to do the teaching in the study groups. What we did was we planned a lesson, we trained an agent to teach it to the homemakers or sometimes we went into the county and talked to the homemakers, to their study group leaders and they went back to their study groups and taught it so, everything we did could reach a lot of people - more than you could do it if you were just doing it on your own. Because we taught people to do it. The same thing is true in 4-H. We help the leaders and they work with the kids.

[33:40]

EU: You say that's changed though now; the relationship with the working of the study groups is different?

AJ: We don't have study groups any longer.

EU: Ohhhh.

AJ: Well, some counties have a small number of study groups, but they do their own programming; they don't work with Extension Home Economics agents to do programming in the counties very often. Once in awhile they may teach a class for a study group, but not very often anymore.

EU: When did that change and why do you think it changed?

AJ: I think it changed while I was working in administration. I think it changed because home economists, well, the Dean of Home Economics felt that some of the things we were teaching might not be as academic as they should be. Because some of their needs were, you know, some of the needs were simply learning how to do things – cooking, food preparation. Some people need that kind of experience and they felt they felt this wasn't something that faculty should be involved in. And as the specialists became faculty members, the way we worked with people, changed. And I don't know how else to explain it.

I think it was a change in how we were organizing Extension because when I came here we worked with the School of Home Economics but we were not faculty members, we were not part of the School of Home Economics, we were part of the Extension staff and there's a difference in being a faculty member in the School of Home Economics and being in on the Extension staff.

EU: And what was that difference then? More academic emphasis?

AJ: When we became faculty members it became important for us to become more academic. We were faculty members and we had to go through the process of promotion and tenure and all of the things that go with faculty and you work differently when you try to do that.

[36:40]

EU: So then, did the county agents have to take over more of the duties that the specialists had done?

AJ: They had to do things by themselves and as the study groups sort of when away...you know to keep an organization going you have to have somebody helping that process. They can't do it by themselves....you have to have somebody...and as Extension withdrew from that organizational part, study groups sort of went away. A lot

of them. We don't have many study groups and they are very independent, they do their own thing and they don't have to worry about whether...the thing that bothers me sometimes is I wonder whether the information they are providing to their members is really correct. But it that was the way we were organized and the women in our groups were very political. When budgets became a problem, they went to the legislature and talked to the legislature about how Extension helped them as a family. Just like 4-H groups can do now.

EU: Okay, let's take a break. This is the end of Part 1.

[38:20]