

Extension Oral History Project – Duane Johnson - Part 1

Date: March 29, 2008

Place: Duane's home in Corvallis

Time: 31:17 minutes

Interviewer: Elizabeth Uhlig, Oral Historian

EU: This is an oral history interview with Duane Johnson for the Extension Service. Today is March 29, 2008 and we're in Duane's home in Corvallis. My name is Elizabeth Uhlig.

[00:20]

Duane, let's start at the beginning. Do you want to tell us where you were born and when you were born?

DJ: I was born March 19, 1937 in Wadena, Minnesota and then from that time my father, a graduate of the University of Minnesota, was with the Farm Home Administration and we moved to several places in Minnesota, including Wadena and Fergus Falls. And then World War II came along and he went into the military so we travelled around the country where I lived in Rantoul, Illinois; Wichita Falls, Texas; Gulfport, Mississippi; and then following the war, my father became a county Extension agent in Red Lake Falls, Minnesota, and then following a few years there, took a position with the Iowa Farm Bureau in Williamsburg, Iowa. Really, where I was raised during my last grammar school years and into high school.

EU: During the War, you said your father was moving around. What was his work?

DJ: My father was a Bell Helicopter instructor with the Army and so at military bases in Rantoul, Wichita Falls and Biloxi.

EU: Do you remember those moves?

DJ: I remember some of them. I remember as a young person the different climates that we lived in and the experiences we had in those different environments.

EU: Did you have brothers and sisters?

DJ: I had a brother and two sisters. Two of them who have passed away. So I have just a sister left.

EU: So, your father first worked for home supply?

DJ: Farm Home Administration.

EU: Oh, okay.

DJ: Following his graduation from the University of Minnesota.

EU: Oh, okay. But then after the War...

DJ: Then he was a county agent and then took a position with Iowa Farm Bureau as a farm supply company manager in Williamsburg, Iowa, which is in southeastern part of Iowa, near Iowa City and Cedar Rapids.

[2:55]

EU: So for awhile then, he was with the Extension Service.

DJ: Yes. He was with the Extension Service about six years; I think it was at Red Lake Falls.

EU: So the Extension Service has been part of your life.

DJ: It has been part of our life and has had significant influence on me, but also the other members of our family.

EU: How would you describe that influence, on your family?

DJ: Well, I think there's always been a deep respect for the outstanding educators and the programs of the Extension Service and the utilization of the resources in making, one, our life much better. And, you know, if you think back into the late 1930s, and into the '40s, you know, you lived on a very reduced, I would call it a very limited economic resource and so a lot of the skills that my mother created and my father helped to create to myself and my sisters and brother, were really came out of the efforts of the Extension Service. Especially in Minnesota and in Iowa.

EU: During the Depression and then World War II,

DJ: Following the Depression and World War II...

EU: I mean those were difficult times for everyone, but especially on the farms.

DJ: That's correct. Well, we were not on a farm. Never did live on a farm. We always lived in small communities.

[4:50]

EU: Were you involved with the Extension Service as a boy?

DJ: Yes I was. I was a 4-H member. I started as a 4-H member in Minnesota with primarily my activities were centered around the gardening program and then when we went to Iowa I was involved with the gardening, and with rabbits, and with sheep, and with beef, and electricity - lot of different kinds of projects. And 4-H really was my major focus outside of my school activities. And I was very, very active in the 4-H program, especially in Iowa. I had great memories of some very excellent volunteer leaders who

worked with us and some of my closest friends back in Iowa were also involved with the 4-H program at that time.

EU: So, you said you lived in the towns but you still kept animals?

DJ: Oh yeah, we lived right on the edge of town. We had some acreage, not a lot of acreage; as I remember it was about four acres, but enough to have that experience.

EU: What stands out, what did you enjoy most about 4-H?

DJ: Well, I think I was always a person that was inquisitive to learn new skills. I think my biggest experiences, the most positive, were always in a leadership area. Leadership in a club and at the county level. In Iowa they had the unique program where youth were the fair board members. I served as the President of the Iowa County Fair Board as a youth member.

EU: This was statewide?

DJ: No, Iowa County. And then I was active on the state council for the 4-H program in Iowa as a high schooler. And I had the absolute wonderful opportunity to participate in National 4-H Club Congress a couple times.

EU: And where was that?

DJ: That was in Chicago at that time. Representing the state of Iowa. And so, I had just a lot of new experiences that maybe would not have been offered to me through those kinds of experiences.

EU: So, obviously, your parents encouraged you in these...

DJ: Always encouraged, but were also very supportive of the activities that I participated in.

[7:50]

EU: When did you graduate from high school?

DJ: I graduated in 1955 from Williamsburg High School and went on to Iowa State College, at that time. And actually, it was the last class of Iowa State College...

EU: Then it became a university?

DJ: Then it became the university. And the same thing was happening at Oregon State when I came here, Oregon State College and then became Oregon State University.

EU: Is that also a Land Grant?

DJ: Both Land Grant universities, active in a lot of activities within the university. Very active with the Veishea Program which is really a spring celebration with their parades and their dances and activities. I was very active and also was active in Cardinal Key which is similar to Mortar Board and so on, at various universities. Got my degree in General Agriculture but it was farm operations with an emphasis in agronomy and animal science. And I had some absolutely wonderful teachers and professors there, probably the one I stayed the closest with was Duane Acker who became president at Nebraska. Those are memories that you know, were just very wonderful.

[9:40]

EU: Did you support yourself through college?

DJ: My family had very limited income. My parents made sure that we had a college education, but again, I tried to support them following graduation, but I also worked all the time I was in college. And actually it was probably the job that probably led me to Oregon a little bit was I was the night manager of the student union and anytime that there was a conference or activities going on in there, I worked with those people in

setups and meeting their particular needs. And that's where I met Frank Ballard and Burton Hutton who were the two people who were instrumental in hiring me following graduation in 1959.

[10:40]

EU: So what were your career goals through college?

DJ: Well, I thought education would be the area that I would focus on. I didn't necessarily start with the idea of a career in Extension but through two summer internships and the activities of the Iowa State 4-H Club and the other activities there, led me to look seriously at a career in Extension. Because of my interest in 4-H and in agriculture it was a natural transition as I got closer to that time to choose a career.

EU: What kind of internships did you have?

DJ: I was a summer intern for three months as an assistant county agent in two of the counties. One case, I had the opportunity to work with an Extension agent and the second year I actually substituted for an agent who was on leave. So it was a growing experience.

EU: Good training, then. So after you graduated; you mentioned Frank Ballard, did he interview you for your position? How did that happen?

DJ: Well, Frank Ballard was kind of a unique individual. Frank had, I did not know it at the time and I learned afterwards, had a unique experience of finding people that he wanted to hire and he hired them. In my particular case, I did not know that during the time that I was the night manager at the student union, the directors and the state 4-H program leaders were meeting there from across the whole country and Frank and Burton Hutton. I got into a conversation with them about the Extension Service in Oregon.

EU: Who was Burton Hutton?

DJ: He was the state 4-H program leader

EU: For...

DJ: For Oregon. And got into the conversation with them about Extension careers and the educational program offered at Oregon and that led to conversation, but I did not know I was being interviewed. Not at all. And during that three-day conference, I found out afterwards, they had talked to Duane Acker, they had talked to the state 4-H program leader, the director of Extension in Iowa, and had actually checked into my academic background and everything. But I had made applications to Iowa, Illinois, Nebraska and North Carolina at the time. And I hadn't thought about going West at that time. But what was surprising was the day after the conference from Denver, Colorado, came a telegram offering me the job in Multnomah County, Oregon.

[14:20]

And I have to say, at that particular time, and I think it's probably still true, Oregon was significantly ahead of many of the states, both academically and fiscally for employment. The offer was significantly higher than what were the offers in other states for beginning Extension professionals.

EU: Why do you think that was? Why did Oregon have a good reputation?

DJ: Well, Oregon always has had an outstanding recognition, nationwide for being on the leading edge to being progressive, but having a statewide system of Extension programming. And the people who have led the Extension Service and the 4-H program in Oregon over the years have been recognized nationally as some of the very, very finest individuals. And speaking in the 4-H side, is that 4-H has always been on the leading edge of some aspect of youth development, family development, community development programming efforts. They have been an innovator, they've been a risk taker, but they have also been able to demonstrate responding to the people's needs

and having significant impact upon the families, communities and individuals who participated in the program.

[15:55]

EU: So even back there in the '50s it had this reputation. Did you accept immediately, or was it a job offer you had to think about?

DJ: I didn't have to think about it a long time. At that time I was dating a young lady at Iowa Methodist School of Nursing who ended up being my wife...

EU: What was her name?

DJ: And she had still another year and I was going to be away. I had to visit with my family and they weren't real happy of me going off the end of the earth to the West. The West ended in Denver (laughter) but it looked like the right match for me and so after graduation, I drove west to Portland. I'd never been to Oregon. I drove into Portland, I did a little bit of looking over the community and then I came to Corvallis where I went through an orientation and did all of the things you needed to do in preparation for coming to the county. My supervisor at that particular time was Gene Lear, and Gene had a significant influence in me in that role and he later became the Director of Extension in Oregon and then was the national leader for Extension later on in his career.

[17:25]

EU: What was your job title?

DJ: My title was County Extension Agent with 4-H and Agriculture responsibilities. Most of it was with the 4-H program but I also did the livestock work in an urban-based county. We had a rural area of the county which was in the Skyline, Sauvies Island area and then in the Corbett, Troutdale area, still very rural and in Orient community was rural. But the Portland area has always been the major metropolitan area in the state of Oregon. And a lot of our programming was built around the urban setting and the offerings in the 4-H program actually were very, very diverse being separate from, not

being really centered just on the agricultural-based programs or home economics programs which the people think of as traditional. But a lot of engineering, we did a lot of creative programming in areas of expressive arts, creative arts, we introduced a lot of new programs to reach young people in the performing arts. So a lot of science based programming early on to reach the young people in that urban setting and to provide them an avenue to participate in the 4-H program.

EU: So with these...you talked about dancing and artistic, these types of programs- there was a Multnomah County Fair?

DJ: Yeah, the Multnomah County Fair was at Gresham at that time. During my career and following my career in the county for awhile and then the county sold that land and moved the county fair to what used to be the Pacific International Livestock Exposition - the expo out in north Portland on Marine Drive. And that became the county fair and for many, many years until actually Multnomah County dropped support in the 1980s, the late '80s, of the county fair and it was moved then to Oak Park. And that's where they still hold the county fair even though the Extension Service doesn't have a formal office in Multnomah County at this time.

[20:00]

EU: So what year did you start working for the Extension Service?

DJ: I started in 1959. I was in Multnomah County until 1970. Actually, in the fall of '69-70 I went back to school at Colorado State University, so I was on a one-year sabbatical and while I was on sabbatical, or at the end of my sabbatical, I had finished my Master's degree and Burton Hutton called me and asked if I would consider coming on the specialist staff at Oregon State University.

[20:40]

EU: What did you study in graduate school?

DJ: Adult education with emphasis in Extension programming and business administration.

EU: Why did you go to Colorado for that?

DJ: They had a very excellent staff that were teaching there. They had a background and understanding of Extension. They had an emphasis within Extension; Denzel Clegg was the head of the department and he had come with a great reputation so that's why I chose....I wanted to study under him...he and Jim Kincaid. Jim Kincaid was the other professor.

EU: Then obviously, you said you got married and your wife came out?

DJ: Yeah, in 1960.

EU: In 1960. What's her name?

DJ: Mary.

EU: So you got married here, or?

DJ: No, we were married in Iowa and our honeymoon was coming from Iowa through the southwest to Oregon.

[21:45]

EU: Could you talk a little bit more about some of the programs you were involved with in Multnomah County. I'm interested because of this urban and rural, I don't want to say divide, but there are specific, different programs.

DJ: Well, there were. The Portland School District actually funded the program for the City of Portland and the school district. Dr. Ed Shannon who grew up in the education system in Oklahoma came to Portland to lead the 4-H program and his offices and his staff were in the school district and they used school facilities. So that was a separate program in the city of Portland.

In Multnomah County, the funding for local support was from the county commissioners and it involved all of the areas around the City of Portland that were still in Multnomah County which was Skyline, Sauvie Island, and then to the east and to the southeast part of the county.

So we had during that time - and I want to step back a minute here, I would say that I had the great fortune of following Clay Miller. Clay Miller had been a county agent with the 4-H program in Multnomah County for 30 years when I had come. I think you'll find that a lot of the original people in the Extension Service made a lifetime career, which is not necessarily true today, working within Extension. And so I had the opportunity to come into a program that was well founded, well respected, and the opportunity to not only take that base but also to work together to build maybe a different type and expanding type of a program.

We had, as I remember, we had in Multnomah County outside the City of Portland, about 2500 members in the county and in the City of Portland they had another 2000 members; so there was a significant population. What I'm leading to here is Portland was one of the very first urban 4-H programs in the country. Actually, its roots were back in the teens and some of the early work in the City of Portland was the victory gardens and the health programs in the school, the nutrition programs in the school, delivered in the school; and actually the volunteers were teachers. And I think there's a history that shows that for Oregon, Portland, Oregon was the very first urban 4-H program in the country. And that was in the teens.

[25:10]

EU: Could you talk a little bit about the victory gardens. Was that strictly during the war? World War II or World War I?

DJ: The victory gardens started in World War I, continued and were expanded through World War II and led to many of the efforts that emerged out of that became

community gardens. Family managed...and were taken on by other people but the concept was built with that kind of a program effort.

So, some of the things that happened during the time I was in that ten years, we had a very, very strong program in Washington County led by Joe Cox who became district director and become Director of Extension and by Harold Black who had his whole career in Clackamas County. And between the four of us and our counter parts, we each had an additional female agents in each of the counties who also worked with us. We started working in a collaborative way to utilize the expertise of all eight of us to deliver programs over the four programs areas. And eventually brought in Columbia County to some degree, especially with Bob Stevely working there in the horse program and then the livestock programs.

And what it involved, we had a lot of cooperative programs. We introduced a junior leadership development camp that was cooperative, we had a spring lamb and marketing show that was for youth and adults that allowed to introduce the marketing of animals through a cooperative type of an effort and that was led by John Leffel who was the county Extension agent at the time, Livestock person, in Washington County.

We shared in the training, in other words, one of us would take the leadership for organizing the training for leaders in all four area programs in a particular subject matter area whether it was volunteer leadership development or whether it was in subject matter. And then we also shared in many new programs that we introduced like interstate exchange programs and to better utilize resources to give new experiences but also utilize resources to strengthen the programs in all of the counties.

[28:10]

I think also that if we came with the ideas that with some very outstanding volunteer leaders that are in our urban settings, the things that I can remember are we introduced at the time with a leader from Fairview, Oregon who developed the very first creative arts project in the state. And then that emerged to a tole painting program, and that then

led to an art painting program for young people to develop their skills, because these were not being offered in any other setting.

We also introduced a geology program cooperative with the Department of Geology and with some of the faculty at Oregon State University. We worked with Joe Capizzi, and this was really more statewide but it became very popular, was entomology program in the state, or in the county, or in the area.

We introduced square dancing which is still very popular with a lot of young people, as well as adults. So those were the kinds of innovative types of programming, introducing subject matter based but built more on not only the skills but the knowledge introducing leadership and community service.

I had the opportunity also to have a leader in the Rockwood area who had a blind son. And then we started working with young people who were blind and that led into some musical activities. We had at least two bands that emerged out of our program of people who had sight disabilities. And so it was the opportunity to reach to audiences that hadn't been reached with other programs. Now, that's not to take away from, we had a very strong economics program, we had a very strong livestock program, and those have continued to be major benchmarks and cornerstones of the Extension 4-H program nationwide and in Oregon. But I think that the introduction of doing community service, the junior leadership and teen leadership programs and public speaking, demonstrations led to presentations were all major foundations of that urban audience. And today, with new people coming in with lots better skills than I in the area of computers, the whole area of sciences and the computer sciences, and so on, have been programs that have really expanded, not only in urban areas but also throughout the state.

EU: Let's take a break here.

[31:15]