

Extension Oral History Project -- Walt Schroeder -- Part 4

Date: October 28, 2007

Place: Walt's home outside Gold Beach, Oregon

Time: 24:25 minutes

Interviewer: Elizabeth Uhlig, Oral Historian

Transcriber: Sue Bowman

EU: This is Part 4 of the oral history interview with Walt Schroeder.

[00:05]

When did you retire from the Extension Service?

WS: On February 28, 1983.

EU: 1983. So let's now then talk about some of your activities since you've been retired. So first, should we talk about the Legislature?

WS: If you insist.

EU: You were a member of the Oregon Legislature...

WS: Yes, Maam.

EU: ... for how many years?

WS: For eight years. When I retired, I thought "oh boy, what a wonderful opportunity to do lots of things I've been wanting to do for years." Pretty soon there was a vacancy in the state legislature for this district and some of my friends said, "Hey, Walt, you're pretty well known in both counties. You worked in both Coos and Curry counties so why don't you consider running?" I said, "no way, I'm not interested in politics at all, except for my voting and being concerned about things like that, but not becoming

generally involved.” Finally, they kept putting the pressure on and putting the pressure on and I finally weakened and said, “OK.” So we filed at the very last minute and almost didn’t make it.

We had a campaign in 1984 and that’s when the campaign was going on for the 1985 session. We hold biennial sessions here in Oregon and had three - four opponents on the Republican primary side and then there were several on the Democratic side but it only came down to one and it was a pretty hot campaign. We tried to have a good clean campaign and I think we did. But fortunately, or unfortunately, I won the election and so was sworn in January of 1985.

And we were asked what committees we would like to serve on and I said Ag, Forestry and Natural Resources and also Education and I think another one too, can’t remember what the other one was but it was one that was of interest to me and so I was appointed to Education and Ag, Forestry and Natural Resources and served a full year under a very fine chairman who was a Democrat because the Democrats were in control at that time. He was a fellow who was a forester from Klamath Falls. And then again in 1987, I ran again against another opponent and won that election. Campaigning was not the most fun thing to do, but it was something that had to be done and I embroiled myself and the family and everybody else very much in that.

And, as Sally mentioned earlier, we got advisory committees. Whenever I got elected, I would set up advisory committees and the family relationships, or interests, fishing, agriculture, forestry, education committees going of local people that I thought were very up to date on some of those things. And met with them before the session because we had pre-printed bills that came out and asked them, “okay, look these over – which way do you think it would be the best for our county to go on those?” And then I corresponded with them regularly during the session, sent them out bills and let them know what was going on so we could get some input from them. The ’87 session did the same thing. The ’89 session did the same thing.

And in '87-89 I was appointed the vice-chair of the Ag Forestry and Natural Resources Committee and presided at a couple of the meetings when the chairman wasn't there. And then in 1991, the Republicans took control and I was appointed as Chairman of the Ag, Forestry and Natural Resources, also served in Education and Water Policy Committee which were all of interest to me. It was a satisfying program in some ways. We got a number of bills passed I thought were good. I mentioned one, the Forest Practices Act, was one that we got passed. I was one of the four major sponsors of that bill.

EU: That was in 1991?

WS: That was 1991, the Oregon Forest Practices Act of 1991 and it was considered to be the finest Forest Practices Act in the nation at that time. I'm not sure where it stands now. But we finally got that passed after some of the difficulties with Senate people.

EU: Did you work with the Governor on that?

WS: Yes, worked with Governor Kitzhaber on that. The Chairman of the Senate Ag Committee was a city boy, an attorney and he wanted to change it all around but we prevailed and the Governor put his thumb on him and said "get this thing straightened out." So the bill that we introduced was the one that was accepted and passed. It passed very handily through the Legislature.

EU: Just to check was Kitzhaber governor at the time or was he...?

WS: I think he was Governor at that time.

EU: Or was he the head of the Senate at that time?

WE: I think he was governor at that time. I'd have to look it up, I guess.

SS: He was the Senate President. It was the Senate President who told the Senator.

WS: Regardless, it was Kitzhaber who did it.

SS: He gets the credit for being a good guy in that instance.

WS: In that instance, yeah.

[5:50]

EU: Can you talk a little bit about that Oregon Forest Practices Act? Because in the '80s was when so much of the timber industry declined.

WS: Right. Well, it was designed to have sustained yields from the forests of Oregon and of course we don't have any control over the federal lands but we use very similar plans to what the federal had. And of course, law suits were filed almost every time there was a timber sale planned.

And so, we've had setbacks from the streams, different kinds of classes of streams, different kinds of setbacks. We had places where they would protect salmon habitat. We had an expert come in here who worked with us on developing that habitat protection and we felt that it was a very good bill and would protect forest lands, allowing them to be harvested to a degree and still protect our salmon habitat and our natural resource base.

Since then, of course, they have come up with the President's Northwest Forest Plan that's never been carried out properly and it never will. And it never will because of lawsuits every time somebody wants to do something. And they just keep throwing up salmon habitat - endangered species are going to be destroyed. There are probably more spotted, well not now because the barn owls come in and eat up the spotted owls, but for awhile there was more spotted owls than there were before living on second growth. So anyway, that was neither here nor there. But we had a number of other bills that we got through that I think were good for Oregon.

[7:30]

One was the statute of limitations on rape and murder, or rape primarily. And that one passed. I introduced that.

SS: Well, in your first session the Home School bill that was enacted. That changed a lot of restrictions against home schooling in Oregon. That was a very enlightening one for us.

WS: I have a whole list of bills that I sponsored that passed and a whole list that didn't pass. I didn't try to introduce more bills than anybody else; I just picked out ones that I thought were good for Oregon. Because if anybody else felt the same way when they introduced a bill, it was good for Oregon.

[8:30]

EU: Do you think when they first asked you, the Republican Party, or your friends, asked you to run as representative, that was largely due to your background in the Extension Service and your expertise in ...

WS: Apparently so, that's what they told me. You have the experience in working with groups and advisory committees and listening to people.

SS: And the farm, rural background. There were a lot of attorneys and a lot of teachers in the Legislature at that time. And still, I guess. And not very many agricultural people.

WS: The one bill I introduced was to recognize the Extension Service on its 75th Anniversary. We had a big day of that too.

SS: We did. It was a celebration at the capital.

[9:25]

EU: Some of your activities, then...I know you are interested in local history and you have written several books about local history here in Curry County.

WS: Well, Jack Ross, who was my supervisor, encouraged me to do some writing. And I hope he wasn't kidding because I took him at this word and I started writing. My first book was a genealogical history of our family and then I got involved in some other things that were just local, just our own family stuff. And then I decided to write a book about the *Curry County Agriculture, the People and the Land*. I used the old Extension Annual Reports; I was fortunate to have a set of the reports from the time Bob Knox was the first county agent here. And those first county reports were valuable because it named dates and things that happened and places and stuff as opposed to the present annual reports because they were able to develop plans on the sheep industry, goats, beef, dairy, lily industry, cranberry industry, forestry. You name it all the way down the line. A chapter for each division. And a lot of photographs I got from the Historical Society or from individual collections. And we had I think 300 copies printed and it sold out immediately and has never been reprinted, so it's out of print now.

[10:50]

After that, I started on one that took me several years to get done. No, just a couple years, I guess. *They Found Gold on the Beach*, it's a history of central Curry County and tells about the early Indian bands here and up to modern times with chapters on different segments of catastrophes, events, different things like that.

And then the more recent one, at the publisher right now, is called *Characters, Legends and Mysteries of Curry County* and it tells the characters, some of the people who were rather whimsical sometimes or odd and the legends of the people who helped develop Curry County and the mysteries are some things that have never been solved that we have always had some questions about them. I have one on trail rides, mostly a compilation of journals, and menus, and stories about some of our 4-H Trail Rides.

EU: Will you publish that one, too?

WS: I'm self publishing that because it has a lot of colored pictures and to have it published by a professional outfit would be a fortune. And there's no market, there's a very limited market – maybe 30 or 40 copies at the most. So I'm copying that myself.

I did one, too, for Sally's high school graduating class. They never had a yearbook, so I – this is just another one that's self-published; *Through the Years, Mitchell High School 1945*.

EU: And that was back in Nebraska.

WS: That was in Nebraska, yes. And what it is is, people... one of her classmate's high school graduation picture, and then we all knew he graduated, and then pictures of his family now. And his brother and cousin and pictures of him now and so on. And then of course, we had a lot of old pictures that some of the kids sent to us. Pictures of the football team, their newspaper, plays, high school football programs, class pictures, class plays. Here's Sally, she was in a class play, "Happy Days." "Best Foot Forward," she was in that one. And candid shots and graduation day and then the class reunions, the class of '45, the 25th reunion up to the latest one, and the class will, class testaments, and those kinds of thing. So it was kinda fun thing to do. They had 45 kids in their class and they were the class of 1945. I feel like I'm more a part of their class than my own class anymore. I've been back to several reunions with her, they treated us like a class member.

[13:55]

EU: Were you active in the local Historical Society?

WS: I helped when it started.

EU: Okay, could you talk about that, then?

WS: Well, we had the History of Curry County class taught by a local lady who is a historian. As a result of that, I got together with some folks and we decided to

rejuvenate an old historical society that had been here that had folded. And so we started the Curry County Historical Society. We had some county funding at that time. We had a little museum. A log cutting, ribbon cutting opening and a nice little museum going for many, many years. And finally, the group brought another building and called it the Curry Historical Society because there was no county funding. They didn't want to give that connotation that there was county money in it.

I served as President for seven or eight years, I guess, of the society and now I'm no longer on the board. I just sit aside and let somebody else do some of that. But I'm still very much involved. I do tours at the museum.

I do cemetery tours – we have a pioneer cemetery here. School kids from Toledo, Newport and Gold Beach come out to the cemetery and we have a cemetery search and they do headstone rubbings and that kind of stuff. It's kind of fun to do something like that. And then, just recently, we had the "Night of the Living Dead." We had a guy in a black cape ringing a bell whenever it was time to change groups, but we had 12 groups, I guess, of 8 people each who went from station to station to the cemetery headstone where that person that was buried was there in full life telling about their life. Oh, what a fascinating program! We had two evening sessions and one daytime session. We did that five years ago and it worked out very well, so we did it again. It was a little fundraiser. You had to pay \$10 a person to get into it.

[15:55]

I do a lot of stuff work the Historical Society taking people on tours of the museum. I am what they call a docent.

But history has been very important in my life. I've always been involved in history since I was ten and a half years old and I was at the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg. My folks took my sister and me over there and there were 2000 of the old veterans up in their 90s still there. And to a ten year old kid! Oh man! That set me afire and I've been involved in history ever since.

And I was interested in Extension history, too. I have some of the early books on Extension history nationwide and so on. And then started to write history. And I've written articles for our historical quarterly we put out. And I get called on to give programs regularly at different parts of the county on different phases of the history of the area. I do a mini history, I also do one on mining and one on shipwrecks, one on the Rogue Indian Wars and so I have a lot of fun doing that.

[17:05]

EU: So you do a lot of volunteer work, then. Not just in history.

WS: I'm very much involved in Rotary; do a lot of volunteer work there. Either as committee chair or one of the workers.

I do a lot of trail building. Dr. Samuel Dickerson of the University of Oregon in the 1950s, suggested that we have a Cascade Trail, Skyline Trail, Pacific Crest Trail, have an Eastern Oregon Trail, we need to have a Coast Trail, so his proposal was to have a trail from the Columbia River to the California state line. It would be 360 miles, and a lot of it is along the beaches, but a lot of it is over the headlands and here in Curry County there are really short beaches, you can't get to them very easily so we had to build all new trail. We built probably 35 or 40 miles of trail in Curry County by having annual spring and fall work parties and we get anywhere from 10 to 25 volunteers come out on a Friday morning from nine until noon and on Saturday from nine until noon, in the spring and again in the fall. We just finished it up last weekend and I wasn't able to go because of my meeting but they finished up another short segment so it's digging trail, flagging it, putting the preliminary line in digging the trail and it's very well used by people down here. It's so convenient, you can just drive a few miles and you are on the Coast Trail. You probably saw some of the signs as you went down. It opens up some beautiful vistas. You think the highway has beautiful vistas but when you get on that trail, you are right on the bluff overlooking the ocean, it's just fantastic. And every segment is a little different from the other one. There's an Indian sands area, there are different areas that have different kinds of growth on them – timber and stuff.

[19:00]

And then we also do a lot of trail work in the back country. One of my favorite trails is up on the county line coming up this way into Curry County called the Brandy Peak Trail. Actually, it's called the Bear Camp Ridge Trail, but I call it the Brandy Peak Trail. It goes to the highest point in Curry County and we built a trail to the top of the highest peak in Curry County, 5,200 and some feet. And then we have in '71 we started with the 4-H clubs and individually, opening up old Forest Service Trails because at one time there were no roads back there; it was all trails like a spider web of trails all over. When I happened to get hold of a 1937 forest map that had all those old trails on it, we started opening up those old trails and the Forest Service had taken them off their system. We got them done and say hey, we're finished with them, back on the system it goes. Then the maintenance is a problem because the stuff grows so fast around here. But we got that going.

[20:00]

I'm involved in Gideons. I'm one of the clowns that put the Bibles in the motels and stuff and I hope they have one in your motel down there. They should have.

I was active in the watershed council. I spent 11 years as a charter member of the Lower Road Watershed Council – just retired from that. Give someone else a chance.

EU: Are you active in your church?

WS: Not as active as I should be. I was at one time; I was on church council and things like that.

Another group – we changed from Northwest Steelheaders to a group called Curry Anadromous Fishermen. Anadromous fish are steelhead, salmon and sturgeon. And we have a little hatchery across the river. I worked very much on that in the earlier days. It's the oldest hatchery in Oregon. Built in 1877 and recently revitalized.

I'm not as active as I was but I still get some things done. I don't know, I do a lot of things. Too many things.

[21:10]

EU: When I look out your window here at your house, it looks out over your garden. You have a wonderful view over the river valley, but you are a gardener and you taught Master Gardener classes? In addition to having your own garden?

WS: In addition to my own garden, yes. Sally razzes me all the time that we had a big garden when our boys were growing up and eating lots of food; we still have the same size garden, how come? I give a lot of it away to friends and neighbors and also we have a Rotary First Harvest Program where the first part of your crop goes to Christian Health or the Seventh Day Adventist Food Program and we give a lot to the Senior Center, so if we have surplus crops we give them away, so it's not wasted.

EU: What kinds of things do you have in your garden?

WS: Well, everything from soup to nuts just about.

SS: No soup and no nuts.

WS: We have an orchard of about 25 trees – apples, pears, plums. We have one cherry tree left. I cut down five recently. They just wouldn't produce any cherries. The birds were getting them all. Corn, cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, beans, dry beans, blueberries, carrots, radishes, strawberries, marionberries, artichokes. That's probably about it and flowers. Sally takes care of the flowers up on this level and I take care of the flowers down below.

SS: That's my job, but I don't do it!

[22:50]

EU: You have taught Master Gardener classes? For the Extension Service?

WS: Yes, the Master Gardener program was just starting in the valley counties when I retired, but it got going down here after I retired, and so almost every year, I didn't do it this year for some reason or another. But every year I've done classes on pruning and grafting, small fruit production, garden layout and plans, varmint control; each year it's a little different but I almost always do the pruning one. I did do a pruning class for the Brookings Garden Club. Bu tactually we talk about it first and then we actually go out and do it.

And last year was one of my finest thing, I think. We had a woman who was just widowed recently and she had a pretty good sized orchard that needed pruning so we used her place for the demonstration and we showed how to prune trees on about two or three of the trees. We had about 20 people say, okay folks, let's see what you learned and they went out and pruned the entire orchard for her. And she was so grateful, Elaine Pomerain, that we had done that and that's what it was all about I think.

And then I'm also serving on the 4-H Awards and Recognition Committee where they select winners of county medals and scholarships each year. And I spend a lot of time, unlike a couple of other agents I know, I spend too much time in the Extension Office, but I have a good relationship I think with them, and I hope I don't get in their way. But my neighboring agent up in Coos County was very active in Extension, when he retired, he dropped out of sight and nobody ever sees him or anything like that. Maybe I go too far the other way, but I think Extension is important enough to help whenever I can.

EU: This is the end of Part 4.

[24:53]

