

Extension Oral History Project - Walt Schroeder – Part 1

Date: October 28, 2007

Place: Walt's home outside Gold Beach, Oregon

Time: 19:29 minutes

Interviewer: Elizabeth Uhlig, Oral Historian

Transcriber: Sue Bowman

EU: This is an oral history interview with Walt Schroeder. Today is October 28, 2007 and we're at his home outside of Gold Beach, Oregon.

[00:10]

Walt, to get started, do you want to tell us where you were born and where you grew up?

WS: Well, I was born in a little town, at that time, called Hackensack, New Jersey which was the county seat of Bergen County. We lived at that time in a community nearby that did not have a hospital, called Lyndhurst. And at a young age we moved to another little town close to Hackensack called Maywood, or in the Dutch term, Maien Valdt which was a little Dutch settlement pretty much and quite a few Germans and others there. I went to school in Maywood; we did not have a high school in that town of Maywood, so all our tenth grade kids after we graduated from ninth grade went over to Bogota High School and they had about the same size population as we had and so we made a full high school -120 in my graduating class. It was a great school, we had a good time together and of course there was a little community rivalry, but not that much. Bogota kids and Maywood kids got along fine. So, I was raised there and spent 8 years in Boy Scouts, hiking, doing all kinds of things that a boy likes to do.

[1:25]

EU: Were you involved in 4-H has a child?

WS: No, I was not. I had a victory garden and that got me interested in 4-H, but I didn't know of any 4-H clubs or anything like that around there. I was involved in the Boy

Scouts at the time too and I decided to stay in Boy Scouts and became an Eagle Scout with two palms so I didn't really have time to go into 4-H at that time. But I did know about the Extension office because I did get some bulletins from them, so I said, "Hey, this is a great outfit, I would sure like to be involved in Extension when I graduate from college." And I assumed I might graduate from college, but my folks couldn't afford to send me so I had to get a scholarship and work my way through college. I had some very interesting jobs and some interesting experiences getting through college.

[2:10]

EU: Did you have brothers and sisters?

WS: I have one sister; she's three years younger than I am and she and her husband live in Corvallis and we get to see them occasionally when we travel through, but that's all just the two of us.

EU: What did your parents do?

WS: My Dad owned a couple of service stations; one was in partnership with another gentleman, but he had two service stations. I used to work there in the summers for him as well as working on – our little community of Maywood had some farms in it, so I worked on the farms there, mostly at one farm called Lydecker's farm, putting up hay and weeding sugar beets and all that kind of stuff for the livestock. I had a great, wonderful time there. I got my interest in agriculture from the gardening and also from working on that farm.

[3:00]

EU: When I think of New Jersey, I think of cities and towns.

WS: Oh yes, and it is that way now. There was a little community right next to us called Paramus, it was all farms and now it's all city. It's a bedroom for New York City. And the same is true of Maywood. The population of Maywood is probably more than six or seven times what it was when we lived there. It's not a nice place to be. It's a nice place to visit, but not a nice place to live...as far as I'm concerned.

EU: Isn't New Jersey the garden state? So it does have an agricultural base?

WS: It was an agricultural base and then between my senior and freshman year in college I worked at a dairy and poultry farm Hunterdon County, which was really an agricultural area in western New Jersey. It was during the war and they were looking for Victory Farm volunteers. So, in addition to my volunteer Victory Garden, I also worked as a volunteer farm worker helping to milking the cows, cleaning out the ..., haying, all kinds of projects there. I just fell in love with agriculture even further at that time. I really enjoyed doing that.

[4:10]

EU: So you said growing up, you knew that you would be going to college, or your parents expected you to?

WS: Well, I wasn't sure. My Dad had to quit school when he was in the sixth grade and he was determined that his kids were going to go to college. We were not wealthy by any means, in fact, of the lower-middle income family, but Dad insisted that I was going to go to college. So we met with the resident director of instruction and I got a scholarship for 40 dollars for a semester and tuition was 80 dollars a semester at that time. So that helped and I worked in the director's office mailing out Victory Garden bulletins. I had a room at a place we called "The Towers" which was upstairs "penthouse" of a factory building. Another fellow and I had the job of stoking the fires at night. So every night, about 11:00 o'clock we would stoke the fires so they would be ready to go the next day again. Then, I washed chemical equipment for the Chemistry Department, including Dr. Selman Waxman who developed streptomycin. We washed equipment for him. I worked for the Horticulture Experiment Station for two years and again got my interest in agriculture really pushed up. I worked with some real famous individuals who had developed peach varieties, pear varieties, and apples and so on, so I had a chance to really see what was behind it all. My job was spraying, harvesting, and just doing all kinds of things on the Horticulture Experiment Station and I loved that job. It was really nice.

[5:45]

EU: Where did you go to college?

WS: I went to Rutgers University, which is the state university of New Jersey for two years.

EU: What years was that?

WS: I started in June of 1945. As soon as I graduated from high school, I got into college immediately and took two courses that summer. At that time all the GIs were coming back too, so the colleges were just straining for places for people to live and study and stuff. But I got along fine with the GIs. We had a great time together; I learned a lot from the GIs. They were all pretty mature, even though they weren't that much older than I was. So I served on different committees with them and worked on different activities and belonged to clubs with them and we had a great time.

[6:30]

EU: So from the beginning, what was your major?

WS: My major at Rutgers was general agriculture because I wasn't sure what area I wanted to go into. I was interested in poultry but also in livestock and crops and I just wanted to test them all, so I took all those things. And then my folks moved out here in 1946. My Dad did a lot of travelling and he had been in 48 of the 48 states and he liked Oregon the best of any of them and so they bought an apartment house in Corvallis because that was where the university was and they wanted me to do to college and we couldn't afford for me to go, so I finished up my second year with Rutgers and finished up the summer working at the Experiment Station and then came out here in early '47.

EU: I was curious how you ended up coming all the way across the country to Oregon.

WS: Well, my Dad just liked it out here. New Jersey was really too crowded and it was just too hectic back there and it wasn't really a place, he didn't feel, to raise kids, even

though we were both teenagers and stuff. He didn't feel that was a great place to raise kids and so he wanted to get to a place that was more friendly toward doing that kind of thing.

And so we lived in Corvallis and I went to OSU and I was delighted with OSU--OSC at that time-- and lived at home and had jobs. For two summers I worked, I think I mentioned yesterday, at what is now the Finley Wildlife Preserve. There was a 4,000 acre beef and seed ranch. I didn't work with the cattle much but I did work on the seed harvesting vetch, rye grass and that kind of stuff, operating equipment, tractors, and combines and in one case I had to operate a combine by myself with a heavy crop of oats and every ten feet I had to stop and tie the sack up and dump it out and jump on the tractor again because they couldn't find any help at that time. So it was a great experience.

EU: And what was your major then at OSC?

WS: I went into Ag Economics Farm Management because that gave me the idea that if I got into Extension I would be able to use that in my Extension work in farm management. And of course, it included a lot of economics courses but it also included courses in the crops and livestock and so on, some of the advanced courses in those. So, I thought it was a pretty good choice to make. I enjoyed farm management. The head of the department was my advisor and just a fine gentleman, D. Curtis Mumford. A real fine gentleman and so we had a good time there.

[9:00]

EU: So was working for Extension always a career goal?

WS: Well, it was in the back of my mind all the time. I thought Extension would be a great outfit. In fact, a little foolish thing, one time I got a letter from an Extension agent, with an enclosure, a franking slip in it – I'm not sure if you are familiar with that, but you always had to put a franking slip in saying "this is a project of Oregon State University Extension Service," and I even kept that in my scrapbook because he had signed it. It

was mimeographed of course. And then I decided I would like to be in Extension. When I graduated from college, I looked into Extension and there were no openings at the time, but a friend of mine, a year ahead of me in college, was the field supervisor (director) of the production marketing administration in Jefferson County, Oregon in Madras and they were looking for a field supervisor to do some work over there so I hired on with them.

[10:00]

EU: Could you talk a little bit about that --- production and marketing administration?

WS: It was the old "three cs" program, Commodity Credit Corporation, I think. It was a depression-era farm program for the New Deal and we became the Agriculture Stabilization Conservation Service and now Farm Services Administration. But I worked at PMA at the time for four and a half months. It was a full-time job, but I did enough stuff ahead so I had time off and when the 4-H agent in Jefferson County couldn't make it to 4-H Camp, I volunteered to take his place for a week. And so I worked with a couple of the agents down there at the 4-H Camp and got recommendations from the county agents from both Crook and Jefferson counties to be in Extension, so they called the Extension Director and said it looks like Schroeder might have some possibilities. They didn't hire anybody without checking with him first, interviewing him and going through all that. And so, I got a call from Charlie Smith who was Associate Director saying, "I hear you're interested in Extension; come on down, I'd like to talk to you." I think I mentioned to you about the poker...

[11:20]

EU: Maybe you could tell that story again?

WS: Hollis Ottaway, who was the chairman in Jefferson County, just a real prince of a guy, said, "Now Walt, Charlie's a poker player. Now he knows how to keep a poker face; and you're going to have to do the same thing when he starts talking salaries." And so I went down; I was making, I think, \$2,800 a year with PMA and Charlie Smith talked to me and said, "Well, I think we can probably hire you and we can pay you \$3,000." I thought, oh....I didn't show expression, I just kept a blank face. \$3,000,

that's a lot better than I'm making right now and I'd love to work with Extension, but I knew what Hollis had said, so I kept my mouth shut and thought for a little bit, and he says "\$3,200." And I said, "Oh, that sounds so good." But I kept my poise a little bit and he said "\$3,600, that's my last offer; take it or leave it." "I'll take it." (Chuckle). He said, "Where do you want to go? We have an opening in Hood River County doing fruits, vegetables or in Coos County doing 4-H." I said that I could do 4-H; I like to work with the kids so I'd like to go to Coos County which was a very good choice.

[12:30]

EU: So you started in 1949?

WS: '49, right. I think it was November of '49 and I got right into it and just loved the people in Coos County. They were just so friendly and so helpful. As I mentioned earlier yesterday, I met quite a few people who were really people-persons. Whenever I had any trouble, I could go to them and visit with them, as well as the senior county agent, to get some advice from him and they were very, very helpful to me and made it so much easier in my work.

[13:10]

EU: Could you talk a little bit about the work you did those first years in Coos County? You said you were the 4-H agent?

WS: Yes, there were two 4-H agents there. I was responsible for the agriculture programs, the forestry and all the other programs except for home economics. And of course, I worked with home economics in training and lining up programs where we did both leaders in home economics and the other programs. And so we lined up training meetings, we went to achievement programs where the kids were given their awards every year. I think that was a valuable experience to go to each community and meet the people. We worked on the 4-H Camp. We had a tri-county 4-H Camp with Coos, Curry and Douglas counties.

EU: These were summer camps?

WS: Yes, summer camps. We had a livestock and crops judging tour and I worked with that. We took turns hosting that. The camp was always held at the same place in Coos County because it was centrally located, but the judging tour we went to a different county each time of the three. Then newsletters, training meetings, just all kinds of stuff that we did.

[14:20]

EU: How would you describe your relation as a county agent with the folks in Corvallis?

WS: Corvallis was good. Yes, I had a very good relationship with the folks there. Especially with the folks on the 4-H staff, which was where I was located on the 4-H team and Doc Allen was still the chair, the 4-H leader and Burton Hutton, Cal Monroe, Winifred Gillen, Esther Taskerud, all just wonderful people and they just gave us all kinds of encouragement and anytime we needed help, we just had to call for it and we got lots of help.

EU: So you worked closely, then, with the area specialists?

WS: Well, mostly with the 4-H staff. Of course, I was not involved in the agriculture program but when I first went on staff I was sent around to every specialist and visited with the crops specialists, the food specialist, the livestock specialist, so I could get a feel for what the Extension program was totally instead of just my 4-H specialty type thing. And I was very impressed with the specialist, the 4-H specialists and others. They were really very intelligent, very sharp people. And people who knew how to work with other people. So I was very much impressed with that and of course, that increased my enthusiasm for Extension.

[15:40]

EU: The first time, then, you were in Coos County, only for a couple of years?

WS: Well, I was there just a little less than a year because the Korean War started in July of 1950 and I was registered with the Draft Board in Corvallis and we were the first

ones called up after the Korean War started. And I think there were seven or eight of us that were drafted and served in the military for two years; almost two years.

EU: Did you take a leave of absence?

WS: Yes, I got a leave of absence, so my job was still there when I got back and they hired a fellow who could take my place while I was gone. He left and they hired another one, who incidentally, became a very good friend and the best man at our wedding. I had a great time there. I just loved this county – I wanted to get back there. As soon as I was released from the military, I went back there.

EU: Could you talk a little bit about your service? Where did you go? Did you go overseas?

WS: Our training was in Fort Ord, California, which is no longer a military camp, but about half of the fellows from our group went over to Korea and the other half, and for some reason, the Lord had it in for us, I guess, so you guys are going to go to Germany. Oh, what a break that was! All my ancestors are from Germany and so I thought, what a wonderful opportunity. So we went to Germany and I was in the Fourth Division and I was a rocket launcher gunner, bazooka gunner.

EU: Where were you stationed in Germany?

WS: I was stationed in Schweinfurt and Schweinfurt was the ball-bearing center of Germany and during the war it was bombed terribly. Even when we got there in 1950-51, it there was still tons and tons of bomb damage they hadn't completely cleared up yet but they were working on it. By the time we left, they had most of it cleaned up. And then, we served on the NATO forces, the reconstituted Fourth Division had been demobilized after the Second World War. But it was mobilized again and we were the first groups into that. And so we were in Germany; there were Fourth Division scattered all over Germany as well as the constabulary and then the First Division was also over

there and our job was to stop the Russians from coming across the border until our other troops could get ready to meet them further back. So I guess we didn't realize we were actually sacrificial lambs, because if they came across we wouldn't be able to stop them very long.

And anyway, I had a chance to get 45 days furlough while I was over there, so I travelled all over Europe. Another fellow and I hitch-hiked through England and Scotland and some of those places. We got a chance to see some agricultural things as well as the people living there. I was really impressed with most of the countries except France. Anyway, so my last few months there, they didn't demobilize, but they scattered the Fourth Division. That's when they started integrating the military. Before they had just black regiments and white regiments and they integrated them. So our outfit was scattered all over the country.

And I was sent down to the First Division at Bamberg not very far from Schweinfurt and I became a squad leader of a weapons squad – machine gun and bazooka. I was the squad leader there for the last three or four months, until I got discharged. They offered me a promotion and sargency but I said, no thanks. I've had enough.

Is this a good place to stop?

EU: OK. This is the end of Part 1.

[19:29]