

Extension Oral History Project – Len Calvert – Part 2

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Interviewer: Elizabeth Uhlig, Oral Historian

Transcriber: Sue Bowman

[Time: 0:00]

Elizabeth Uhlig: This is part two of the oral history project with Len Calvert. Len, let's talk a little bit about the history of the Extension Service. Could you talk about maybe some of the differences between the Oregon Extension Service and Extension Service in the Midwest and how they developed?

Len Calvert: Oh, my, we'll try. Extension in Oregon, really, OK. Do you know about the Smith Lever Act of 1914 which was passed by Congress, which established the Extension Service, nationwide, made this all possible. And, it was a partnership between the Land Grant universities and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

In the beginning, Oregon, how do I want to say it, foreshadowed the Smith Lever Act in 1914. In 1913 when the Oregon Legislature passed the authorization to establish the Extension Service, even before that, in anticipation that Congress was going to act. So, the way the Extension developed here was, as far as I know, we've always had academic appointments – county agents and specialists always were part of the faculty at Oregon State. This was not true in all states. States handled it very differently. In North Carolina, for instance, a friend was telling me that all the county agents were instructors, unilaterally, it didn't matter how long they had been there, what degrees, they just had this blanket thing. You could go from instructor to assistant professor, to associate professor, to full professor.

One of the things, that there were some fights in the beginning as I understand it from Mr. Ballard's book. There was a longstanding, I won't say feud, but tension between the Extension Service and the Soil Conservation Service, for instance, over who was going to do what. And they didn't really co-exist terribly well in USDA for many, many, many years. This was still true in the 1960s because Extension was seen by USDA as the educational and informational arm of the department. Okay? The Soil Conservation wanted to do that. And so there was always this tension.

[3:20]

In Oregon, the early leaders of Extension, and I'm not sure by design, I think it just sort of happened, began to work with the growers, the farmers, in what we call commodity groups. All the strawberry growers, so you develop the Oregon Strawberry Council and you have county associations and things like this. Or livestock producers. Western Oregon Livestock Association was started by Extension. The Oregon Wheat League was started by Extension. And so what developed over the years, as the agents and specialists worked with these groups, were very strong commodity groups and fairly weak statewide groups like the Grange and the Farm Bureau were not as strong here as they were in some other parts of the country. Particularly in the Midwest where the Farm Bureau was very strong and actually controlled the county agents in some respects, for several years in the beginning. In fact, I think it was Indiana and maybe Iowa, I can't remember, I'm pretty sure about Indiana, the county agents were sometimes housed in the Farm Bureau offices – and so became sort of agents of the Farm Bureau.

And that did not happen here and Mr. Ballard - apparently the Farm Bureau made a run at this in the teens, according to Mr. Ballard and it was not successful. And so I've always had the theory that you have like the Farm Bureau and the Grange here are not quite as strong as they are in some parts of the country because of that. I mean, the Wheat Growers were much more

interested in what their association was doing...sometime you should do a thing about the Wheat Growers. They are incredible – just incredible. They developed the Asian Markets, they did just so many things. They are just amazing. So anyway, that's sort of the way it went.

[6:15]

In the early days, Ag was the first one, that was the first program. In fact, I have a copy of a county agent's handbook. I made copies of various pages and it was fascinating...published by the USDA and including lists of frequently asked questions and answers to and things like this and it's fun to read.

In fact, the term agent comes from our appointments. We had joint appointments with Oregon State and the USDA. We were considered USDA employees and Oregon State employees. In fact, I still have my USDA identification card, which we were supposed to turn in, but I didn't. [laughter] And so that's partially where the term agent came from. You were an agent of the Department of Agriculture. The running joke is sort of, "I'm from the Government and I'm here to help you." [laughter]

In fact, one of the things I always found fascinating because by and large I think you would say that, I don't know about now, but back then, the Extension staff was fairly conservative. This was not a flamingly liberal organization. And I used to get so amused because the county agents would sit around and denounce the government – they didn't like this program or they didn't like that or something and I just chuckled because in their billfolds were there USDA ID cards.

[8:28]

EU: So basically, you had the Extension Service, you had the University, you had the USDA. I mean, three different masters, obviously it didn't always work smoothly?

LC: It worked better than you might think. The Dean of Agriculture was called the Dean and Director in those days, until I think sometime in the '80s and he

was the Dean of the School of Agriculture; he was Director of the Extension Service and also Director of the Agricultural Experiment Stations. And so, the School of Agriculture became the umbrella within the University. So everything went that way which is standard procedure. USDA was never much directive. There were a few times. In the early '60s I can remember because I had to write the news releases with Ag Economists; there was a wheat referendum, on I've forgotten exactly on what. But anyway, it was very important and so partly as our role with USDA was to tell people what was at stake, and you were trying not to tell people how to vote, but if you vote yes, this, this, this, and this; if you vote no, that, that, and that. So occasionally, you would get involved with things like that where it became very important to the growers that they understand what was going on from the feds.

[10:30]

Where the USDA people came in, and I think this has largely been dismantled now in USDA, I don't think much exists anymore, but they used to have specialists...sort of the counterparts of the subject matter specialists in the universities. And so, for instance, in food preservation, it was the university's and the researchers in the Department of Agriculture who developed the recommendations on how long things should be processed and things like that. We had counter parts in Information and I remember a couple of times a USDA radio station specialist came and did training for our office.

When the community development, except that wasn't what it was called in those days. It was sort of part of the War on Poverty stuff where you were to organize the neighborhoods and somebody in Chicago did this better than anybody else, but we had, I remember having a specialist from USDA come to Corvallis and we all went to some sort of training session on this and how it was to work. And that seemed to be their primary role was to support the states when the states didn't have the answer. There's a major USDA research facility just outside Washington D.C. at Beltsville, Maryland, which is a big deal.

[12:38]

EU: Maybe this is a time to talk a little more about funding and money.

LC: Well, yes. In the olden days, [laughter] Mr. Ballard, as I understand it, was always very proud of the fact that Oregon got more state funds than most states. The balance was predominately state. There is a formula for the federal funds and I can't recite it. I know it exists and it's based partly on the number of farms in your state. Oregon always spent its money differently than many states. In Oregon the federal and state monies were basically co-mingled, I think - my perception. So, they were used for salaries for the specialists and the agents. Unlike some states which I didn't realize for a long time, because I would look in the directories and Ohio would have all these people in their information office – 15 or 20 people and we had five! And - how could they do this? Well, it turns out that they used all their federal money and I think most of their state money for state staff and the county agents were paid by the counties. That wasn't true here because the county funds were seen as or local funds, whatever you want to call them, but it started out to be part of the county budget and that was to be used to support the county office. It was to pay the secretaries, travel, rent, if there were things like that, equipment – to be used in the county.

[15:10]

EU: But the salaries for the agents themselves....

LC: Came from the state and federal. And so the county support, the local support is very important and the policy of Oregon State, which I think is good, is that there is no county office if there is no county support or local support. We close down.

EU: And did that happen frequently?

LC: It did in the '30s. If you go back to Mr. Ballard's manuscript you will find that there was an agent in a county or maybe two agents and then there's a gap and then it starts up again. And the gap basically is in the '30s when the local governments didn't have the money, and so it did happen. Well, it has happened

recently. I mean, just two years ago, three years ago when Multnomah County withdrew its funds, and so there is no Extension Office, county office in Multnomah County. There are some Oregon State activities still going on, but if you want to be in 4-H in Multnomah County you have to go to Clackamas or Washington.

[16:58]

EU: Why did that happen? Was it strictly budget?

LC: It was budgets. And it may happen again because the timber-dependent counties, particularly in Southern Oregon, are in a real crisis in some counties and so who knows what will happen? One of the things that happened, I think .. I was going to look this up before you came but couldn't find it...about 19...late '70s, early '80s was the next time that something like that happened, I mean after the '30s. Crook County decided that they couldn't support Extension through the county government. And so this became a real issue. And the agents there, the three agents did not want to close the office. They were trying really hard to hang on. And so what they did, I think for two years they lived on contributions – people gave money to keep the office going.

[18:18]

Then the Legislature passed a law which enabled us to form what are called 4-H and Extension Service Districts. The title is strange, I mean 4-H and Extension because 4-H is part of Extension, but that's the way it got passed. It was done primarily because of the situation in Crook County. And then so the people in Crook County then voted to form a district and they taxed themselves, the district has its own tax base and so they go on.

[19:10]

So, what happened then later Several counties started having problems with their budgets and so off we went forming the Extension Service Districts. And Crook was the first one, and then I worked on campaigns and drives, etc. etc., in Curry, Lincoln, Clatsop, Tillamook, Grant, Lake. I didn't help with Deschutes. About six, seven, eight counties. What happened was that then each county

became a district and the district covers the county except in Clatsop County. Under the law, incorporated cities have to pass a resolution saying that they want to participate in the district. Cannon Beach decided they didn't want to, and so they're not part of the district in Clatsop County, and neither do they receive services from the Extension Service. They can come into the county office in Astoria and get bulletins, I'm sure and things like that, but we will not organize, we will not have organized groups there. No money, no services. Sort of like no shoes, no shirt, no service. [laughter]

EU: So even within a county there were...

LC: Just that one. Just that one.

[21:20]

EU: Do you want to talk a little bit about the election in Morrow County?

LEN: No! [laughter.] That's the one I lost by 13 votes. And it was my fault, well, not my fault exactly, but I'll take part of the blame. I was very concerned about the north end of Morrow County, which is Boardman, Irrigon, which is growing rapidly, lots of new people and it was felt that they didn't know much about Extension. The county seat is Heppner; we'd been there forever and partly, I thought that the Heppner area was, quote, "safe," unquote. And, I probably didn't advise that we do as much there as we did in some other parts. And we lost and that's where we lost was in Heppner. It just really blindsided me, I didn't expect that.

But, you know, one of the things you learn when you do this sort of thing, is a lot of people think, Oh, well, working in a small county, a small population like Wheeler, Lake, it's so easy, you still have to worry about a lot of things like you do in Washington County or Lane County. It's harder, or no easier. And partly it's because they are small and people have long memories and you are dealing with something that happened 20 years ago that they still haven't quite forgiven X

for doing, you know? [laughter] And so it's not necessarily easier. In some respects it's harder because bruised feelings go on for a long time in some places.

[24:08]

EU: One time when we talked you mentioned about the role or the position that the agents had in their counties – that they were the experts; they were the leaders and very much respected in the counties.

LC: Oh, yes, I think so, by and large. yes. I don't know about now. Because the Extension Service is organized quite differently, the agents are working differently than they used to. In the '60s and '70s I could call a county agent and say okay, I need a ... give me the names of three people that you've worked with that have done wondrous things with pasture, for instance, and they could do it. I'm not sure hardly any of them could do that now. Because there are fewer of them. My perception is that they do not make home visits and farm visits and stuff like they used to. And so I'm not sure that they could tell you all those things. Maybe in some of the really small counties, they still could. But any of the larger counties...

[25:30]

I think one of the things that made Extension such a force in the earlier days, Oregon was highly regarded for it's program planning. Nationally, it was considered one of our great strengths and for several years, several decades we went through the ten-year planning conferences, and people would dread them.

But what you did was you organized, say in Gilliam County, which is small, it's not a big county – Condon, Arlington. You have 200 people working on various committees to see what the needs are, and they weren't confined just to families and farms; it included education, public health - it was very comprehensive. What happened in the areas that Extension didn't work, like education and public health, they would pass the information on to the appropriate agency who could deal with that. And the results of the conferences became the blue print for what

was done in that county for the next ten years, by and large. Then it was determined that ten years was too long in the modern era, and so it was five and I don't know what they do now. I mean it's sort of disintegrated. My view.

In fact, if you were to go to the Archives at Oregon State, I think you would find copies of the ten year planning conferences of all the counties. I think. Or at least certainly most of them. They are amazing documents. How many farms, how many acres were irrigated, what the future should be, as near as anybody could tell. I got in on the tail end of the very last one of those.

[28:10]

EU: And so did they, if they made ten year plans, did they actually carry them out?

LC: Oh yeah, it wasn't just an exercise. Because, theoretically, you see, the way Extension should work is you have the local agents working with the local people; they identify a problem; we've got a certain kind of weed or something. Then, up the chain it goes to the Agricultural Research Station where the researchers should then conduct the scientific study that says, okay, If you do this, this, and this, you will get rid of this weed and then it goes back down. But it always should come up. And that's how Extension programs, theoretically, used to be done. It was from the ground up, not from the top down. It wasn't Oregon State telling the people, this is what you had to do or should do.

EU: And do you think that's what has happened now?

LC: I think there's more top down now. That's my perception.

[29:40]

EU: This may be the time to work into another topic I wanted to ask you about. And that is the broader relationship of the Extension Service and the University. I think we've talked a little bit about the traditional relation. How has that changed since when you started in the '60s and '70s?

LC: Well, it's changed a lot. Part of what drove the changes, not all of it, but part of it, was the University itself. For instance, many specialists were secretaries of statewide commodity groups and would work very closely with them. At one time, I think in the late '60s, there was a study done and somebody decided this wasn't really a part of the academic role of the University, and so forth and so on, and that we should stop doing it. Which we did. The reason it was done in the first place, as I always understood, was that having Extension people in these roles helped direct the direction of the program. They would help organize the annual meetings, and they would basically determine who the speakers were going to be, and so you could have the right researchers; it could become much more educational than being just put together. So we stopped doing that and that sort of put us back half a step from the people, or at least that's my belief.

[31:42]

Part of it was driven by the addition of additional monies and programs. Such as Sea Grant. Oregon State is a Sea Grant institution. Part of Sea Grant is an outreach program. The first Sea Grant director, no he wasn't the first director of Sea Grant, he was one of the key figures when Sea Grant first started and he had been an Extension agent and his goal, successfully, was to incorporate Sea Grant, the outreach of Sea Grant, into the Extension Service because we had the existing structure and offices, and so forth, so they didn't have to re-invent the wheel. It makes a great deal of sense, but it introduced a different element. It was not state-wide. It could have been, I shouldn't say it wasn't state-wide, but it was primarily concentrated on the coast and Portland with the Port of Portland. And then you had specialists in a different school – Oceanography.

[33:15]

For a long, long time there had been specialists in Forestry – one or two, not many. Then, at some point, I've forgotten when, the Legislature decided we should have more. So they appropriated money, so forth and so on. So all at once, we had foresters. We had five or six specialists, we had probably eight agents, or maybe more. That was their job was to work with the foresters and

the forest industry. We hadn't had people who worked with mill owners on modernizing their mills; now we did. And so because of the variety, I guess, it was felt that Extension, we being Extension in the School of Agriculture was not valid anymore. And so, they took us out of there, or we went out and then we became, I don't remember who we were reporting to, I guess, the Provost. Anyway, we became much more of a university arm then. Then everyone became members of an academic department, which gave the department heads much more control.

[35:05]

EU: This was the area specialists and the agents were also now part of an academic department?

LC: Yeah.

EU: How did that change things? Was that a good move?

LC: I don't think so, bluntly. [laughter] I think what happens is if you are a young academic and you are concerned about tenure and all these things, they used to have to please the Extension Service. Now, you have to please your department head and that's a whole different thing, I think. It's much more academic, it's not that Extension wasn't academic, but we were not academic in the usual sense. We weren't necessarily being judged on how much grant money we brought in. Or how many publications or articles we had in juried journals. I always thought it was so nice because we were judged on what we did. [laughter]

And then they also, there's more with the specialists on campus, there's a lot more split appointments now. They have joint research and Extension appointments, and some have three-way spits with teaching, research and Extension. So Extension does not get their full attention. It can't. So the culture changes.

And I think one of the biggest things that has happened and maybe it would have happened anyway, who knows, Extension, the Extension staff used to be fairly cohesive. And I don't see that as much anymore, I don't think. They are much more oriented toward the department and less toward the whole. And why shouldn't they be? That's their future. And so it's made a big change, in my view.

EU: And then, there was a more recent ... Oh, go ahead.

[38:00]

LC: Well, I was just going to say the other difference is they no longer have federal appointments. This occurred not too long ago – about 2000 maybe. And apparently some people have said that they thought what drove that was affirmative action in a sense because USDA had no say over who was hired at the state level. Universities hired people, not USDA. And apparently, some of the government lawyers and people like that were very concerned about this that they could be sued if somebody was unhappy. Now whether that is true or not, I don't know but that was supposedly one of the reasons.

EU: So what are the ties then with the Federal?

LC: Only the money, as far as I can see.

EU: The Extension Service now is part of Distance Education?

LC: I guess, I'm not clear on that. Except that the Director now is Vice Provost for something or other.

[39:25]

EU: So it seems since the '60s when you started, there has been quite an evolution.

LC: Yes, yes. And I think one of the saddest things – my perception again – is the stepping back from the people. I don't think Extension is as close to the people as it used to be. I think that's really too bad. We were very important; I think we are less important now. And maybe that's partly society, too. The changes in society. You could always have...

I used to have really fun discussions with one of the program leaders about staffing. We traveled together a fair amount at times and you could sort of play games a little bit. Because if you wanted numbers, H. J. Meyers was the 4-H program leader and if you wanted numbers in enrollment – you know, you say you worked with x-number of youth; obviously, you were going to put your staff in Washington, Multnomah, Clackamas, Lane, Marion – the big counties and that was okay. But you could also argue that if the role of 4-H was to truly have an impact on that young person and you were really going to make a difference in what happens in their lives, you really should put more emphasis on staff in places like Gilliam County, Sherman County, Morrow, the Eastern Oregon counties with small populations, but also very few services. Because in some of those counties, I obviously don't know currently, but it was the only thing that the kids had was school and 4-H. There were no Scouts, there was no Campfire, Boys & Girls Clubs, things like that. It was us and the schools. And so if you really wanted to make a difference, I think now of a significant argument that you should have people there. That they will make a greater difference than they would in the Portland metro area. [laughter] You won't get the numbers, but you may make a bigger difference.

EU: OK, let's take a break. This is the end of Part 2.

[42:42]