

Smithsonian Folklife Interview

Ed Gross
Retired Soil Scientist
Siskiyou National Forest
Brookings, Oregon

June, 2004
Interviewer: Lee Webb

[Camera displays two portraits (Ed Gross and his wife) hung on an interior wall. Ed Gross beneath them.]

Ed Gross (EG): Hi. I'm Ed Gross, G-R-O-S-S, from Brookings, Oregon. I'm a retired soils scientist. That was my wife, Bobbie, standing in Kelso Prairie in north central Iowa.

[Camera shows the bank of a river. EG seated.]

[TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE: Possibly because the interview is conducted outdoors, most of the Interviewer's remarks are inaudible. Fortunately most of the Interviewee's answers suggest what the questions were.]

EG: Hi again. We're on the shore of the Winchuck River in southwestern Oregon, about three miles from the Pacific. The day's a little overcast. A typical cool summer day on the coast.

LW: Ed, what year were you born?

EG: I was born in August 1936, in Fayette County, Iowa.

LW: How'd you happen to choose the Forest Service [for your career].

EG: It was almost by accident. You wouldn't think anything like that would be accident, but I always had an interest in forestry because of my strong family interest in forestry in northeast Iowa, where my father was the first person I really knew who managed hardwood forests and managed them in their native state. So that's really where my interest in forestry came from.

LW: [inaudible question]

EG: Yeah. After college I worked for a couple of years at Florida A & M University, Tallahassee, and I could see that teaching wasn't for me, and so I applied with the Forest Service,

and Yvonne Nelson of the Region Nine, whom I'd known a little bit, found out about it, and I was fortunate enough to get a job on the Monongahela National Forest in northern West Virginia. It was right at the time that the Monongahela had been stopped from all timber sales by the injunction. The Monongahela Decision. Well I got there, and not much was done for a couple of years, 'til the National Forest Management Act came along in, I believe it was 1976.

LW: Where did you get your degrees, and what are they in?

EG: Well, my degrees... I went to Wisconsin State University, and I graduated there in 1965 with a degree in general conservation, with emphasis in soil science. And then I went to the University of Minnesota and earned a masters degree and a Ph.D. degree in soil science, but with emphasis in geology and botany. And I graduated from there in 1973.

LW: That wasn't the last degree, was it?

EG: Yep, that's the last degree.

LW: Was the Forest Service what you expected?

EG: Oh yeah, and then some. I was pleasantly surprised with the Forest Service. It kind of offered me a kind of work I liked, and I never really thought of it as work. Oh, occasionally we had to think about work. But I thought being in the field, out in the forest, whether it be in the hardwood forest of the East, or the coastal forest of southeast Alaska, or the coastal forest here of southwest Oregon, was all enjoyable. There's so many aspects of things you could look at and see out there, besides what you were supposed to be doing.

LW: What year did you start with the Forest Service, and what year did you retire?

EG: I started in 1975. I'd had quite a career working in sawmills and carpentry prior to that; prior and after, before and after my army experience. And then I retired in 1998, January first.

LW: What years were you in the army?

EG: I was in the army from '58 to '61. 1958 to 1961, and spent some time overseas.

LW: That's prior to Vietnam?

EG: Yes, I was in prior to Vietnam.

LW: [inaudible question]

EG: Well, I started out my career in West Virginia, and there I was soil scientist with the supervisor office. Of course we had an injunction against all timber sales, so we did a lot of field work, but it never really related to timber sales at the time. It was more with recreation and some other things. Spent a few years there, and then took a job in the regional office in Juneau, Alaska. I enjoyed my time in Alaska, and I worked there as a regional soil scientist. However my true

love was being in the field, and I had to spend far too much time in a regional office setting with meetings and budgeting and sort of non-natural resource issues.

LW: [Did you see a lot] of Alaska?

EG: We saw a lot of southeast Alaska; quite a bit with work and reviews. So we saw the panhandle. Kind of in a peripheral view because I didn't work in the field all the time. But we did, we enjoyed interior Alaska and northern Yukon. Oftentimes went camping there.

LW: [What was] your next stop?

EG: Well, after I stopped in Juneau I got a job here on the Siskiyou, and I spent about eighteen or nineteen years here. I started here in 1982, and I retired in '98, so I guess it was only about seventeen years, but I was stationed on the Chet co District but worked all around the forest. Certainly enjoyed working here.

LW: [inaudible question]

EG: Yeah, I was a supervisor's office person, but I had the ideal position, where you're not too close to your boss, and a very enjoyable setting. We had some outstanding people working on the Siskiyou Forest at the time. Bob Etnner was my supervisor, and certainly one of the best. And then Ron McCormack was the forest supervisor, who I think I probably had more respect for him than a lot of people. He was very ethical person.

LW: [Largely inaudible question, apparently about how the Forest Service has changed]

EG: Well, there was certainly evolution all the time, or a change that is sort of non-stop change. As I mentioned earlier, I started in West Virginia, and it was the time of the Monongahela Decision, and the National Forest Management Act came out about then, 1976; but it's been fraught with controversy ever since. And so it's a constant source of change. In Alaska it was Alaskan Native Claims Settlement Act, which was a very big deal for the Alaska region. Of course then coming here, I think it's been controversial ever since I arrived. Some of the issues here on the coastal districts where we were doing hardwood conversions, where we were cutting down heavy stands of tan oaks and the hardwoods, and then burning the slash and then planting Douglas fir. Fortunately that came to a stop when the citizens got on this; and I think a number of managers were aware of the large waste that was involved with converting hardwoods. Not only waste of the wood product, but had quite a devastating effect on wildlife and just the natural ecosystem.

LW: [inaudible remark]

EG: Yeah. And then of course after that, after the hardwood conversion, the Siskiyou has been enjoying tree sitters and controversial timber sales ever since. So there's always been quite a change going on.

LW: [inaudible remark concerning the Northwest Forest Plan]

EG: I guess the Northwest Forest Plan was necessary. I think it was kind of designed by somebody who was a little bit evil. It required so much field work, so much investigation, whether it be in water, soils, wildlife, birds, that it made it almost impossible for any form of managing activities to take place. They could always be enjoined from proceeding. So while I think it was a great act, or a great plan, it was very difficult to carry out.

LW: Yeah, it was. [Extended inaudible remarks]

EG: Back in the late '70s, early '80s, right.

LW: [Continues inaudible remarks]

EG: Right. We've never been able to meet that twenty or so million board feet of timber harvest, mostly because of the injunctions and lawsuits and so on. I think the forest could probably sustain something like twenty, twenty-five million per year, but that's something I'm not an expert in and I can't know.

LW: Do you remember Ed, when [question becomes inaudible]

EG: [Laughs] Yeah, when all of our money came from the timber program. Yeah, we had quite a timber program. And I think that was true of all the Western forests. The Siskiyou was certainly one of those. Where, if you needed money or funds for some very important project, or issues, or forest function, the money always came from some corner of the timber program. It probably wasn't right that it came that way, but the timber program was the one that had the money. And the collapse of the timber program is in large part why the Forest Service now has declined so much in funding and personnel.

LW: [inaudible question]

EG: Oh yes. Yes. When I was ready to retire in '98, the system was glad to see me go. It wasn't because of my quality of work, but it was simply that we were trying to reduce personnel at the time, so that we could fit the personnel into a very limited budget.

LW: Did regulations increase the paperwork [a few words inaudible].

EG: I think it did for many aspects of it. Yeah. Especially with the Northwest Forest Plan. Lots of paperwork. I can remember when I first came here, that a timber sale was, the whole paperwork for a timber sale planning could be probably about a quarter inch thick. Nice neat little program. Unfortunately it didn't consider a lot of the other aspects of what makes up a forest. And we were always sort of behind the eight ball on that, and that's where we really got caught up in the late '80s and the early '90s. And then came along, we found out more and more about the marbled murrelet and the northern spotted owl. I can remember in 1984, we were talking with some of us in our office one day and they mentioned the person's name named Eric Forsman, and they were, I believe, dealing with the owl, I think it was, at that time. Yeah, the northern spotted owl. And we all kind of chuckled, and we really didn't know much about it. We

were all ignorant of it. And of course that all evolved since about 1984, '85, '86, and that period, up to where we're at now.

LW: [inaudible question]

EG: Oh yes. I think... Well, I don't know. If anybody wanted to see a spotted owl, it was pretty easy to do. They're quite a docile bird. We were out going to see a spotted owl one day, and we parked in a landing, and this is a landing where there had been logging earlier. And so there was a pile of old log [growths], unsalvageable logs laying there, and we were sitting there eating lunch; and we knew the spotted owl was in the nearby forest, and after lunch we were going to call this owl and try to feed the owl a mouse. And the owl must have been used to this, because during lunch who should be sitting on our left side on the log pile but the owl. So we quickly went into the forest and got the owl into the forest. Then we saw the adults and a pair of young. It was on the Gold Beach Ranger District of the Siskiyou National Forest.

LW: [extended inaudible remarks]

EG: Yeah. Yeah.

LW: [remarks continue]

EG: Oh yeah. It was a white workforce when I came to work. There were women in the office in the Forest Service, at least at the forest level and the district level, but I don't think, almost no one in the field type position in our field, with field responsibilities such as timer or wildlife or soils, my field. We got a couple of students when I was on the Monongahela, who we were considered to be way out front with having a woman student working with us at the time. Then I went to Alaska, and things seemed to progress rather rapidly, but I think there was an awful lot of discrimination at that time. Since, on the Siskiyou, we on the Siskiyou and also the Region Six, or the Northwest region, has really made great attempts to bring both women and minorities into the workforce. It hasn't always been easy, and it hasn't been always a smooth process, but I think it's certainly been beneficial to the product we produce. I've always been especially impressed with the quality, or a different type of aspect that women bring to our meetings. These meetings were formerly all men, and men are kind of being macho beings, but women often add quite a sense, a different sense to meetings than with men alone in a meeting. Very significant.

LW: [inaudible question about perceptions of the Forest Service]

EG: Well... How the Forest Service... How they feel about us at the Forest Service. [Laughs] I don't know. When I mentioned I came in at the Monongahela back in 1975, they sure didn't think much of us in West Virginia. There was lots of controversy at that time. The Isaac Walton League challenged some timber sales there on the Gauley Ranger District, and of course got the Monongahela decision as a result. So there was controversy then, and in Alaska there was certainly lots of controversy. Different kinds of controversy, I guess, in terms of land allocations, and also wildlife issues particularly came up there, with the blacktail deer, and clearcuts. So the public was on the Forest Service case in Alaska, and that really didn't change very much here. Seems like it's a rather limited portion of the public, but they certainly get a lot of attention. It's

not... It's been good. It's really been, I think it's been fortunate that we've had that kind of public attention. The protesters and the people who want this change aren't always on the right track as far as managing forests ecologically, but through their efforts we usually get there. We have gotten quite a ways with their help. It's been difficult at times, but there's always been controversy with the natural resources agencies. Or this agency, with the Forest Service particularly.

LW: [Extended comment/question]

EG: Oh, I think the people who are really familiar with, and have a good understanding of the forest, have a great deal of respect for it. I've never really had—I've talked to a lot of people—I've never really had a very negative attitude of, from people as regards our management, or the Forest Service management of the land. In fact it's oftentimes very positive. People will come and, well this is one last little vestige where I can camp or I can fish or hunt. I think from that standpoint there's a lot of positive opinions about the Forest Service. We don't always hear those. We hear the ones who talk the loudest and get their names in the paper. So that's where the attention is drawn.

LW: Ed, there must have been a number of projects that you worked on in the Forest Service [words inaudible]. Can you tell us about those?

EG: Well I thought a couple that were especially valuable to me, and I think valuable for the forest. The first of which is the completion of the Curry County soil survey, in cooperation with the Natural Resources Conservation Service. The Forest Service took the lead role in completing this survey, and we ultimately had the maps digitized and the information put on the... so that you access it from the internet. It's now available there for anyone to use, and it's really a real gift to be able to go in and see what kinds of soils you have, with the descriptions and the mapping. Another project which I thought was quite valuable right on the ground, sort of a point source thing, was our large woody material provision that the Siskiyou put together. This provision allowed us to leave certain aspects of organic matter, such as logs and woody debris, in the forest after timber sales.

LW: One of the problems was that [words inaudible] wanted to clean up everything.

EG: Yeah. We had a very utilization-oriented timber sale contract. This was the general contract, which was to use up all the wood product that the land produced. So to make that change, so that we could leave things for the benefit of certain critters—large animals right down to the microbes; birds—was quite a bit of work, so that we ultimately ended up being able to leave certain pieces of logs, certain trees: both standing, dead trees, and downed logs, that rot and decompose and ultimately go into the soil, and in that process form benefits for many, many species.

LW: [Inaudible remarks]

EG: Oh it was kind of a laughable subject at first. We had a district ranger at Gold Beach named Pete Brost, who was pretty hot on this subject, and he liked it. So we went to the Blue River

Ranger District in the Willamette Forest for a visit, and looked at what they were able to do and how it was working there, and brought back some ideas, and I think we worked on this for six, seven, eight years before we finally emerged with something that could be approved by the regional office and by this, the Siskiyou Forest, and ultimately we were able to put this into the form of a timber sale provision. A timber sale contract provision, where it could be implemented along with the timber sale. In other words, take some logs away from the land, but also leave certain parts of the forest there, which could be designated.

LW: [inaudible question]

EG: I don't know. I think there's, I think that's about... I don't know.

LW: [inaudible question]

EG: Oh, there was many incidents that were kind of exciting. Nothing too dangerous, but I remember one particular... This was on the salvaging after the Silver Fire. The loggers had their yarders set up in the middle of the road, so to drive around or get by the yarder you had to drive around the yarding machine. So one night at closing time I just happened to come across this yarder, and so I slowed down and very slowly drove around in low gear through the mud around the yarder. Unbeknownst to me, the manager of the operation, Joe, jumped into the back of my pickup truck as I was in low gear going around the yarder. Well, his plan was to ride up to the crummy, which was about a hundred yards up the road, and then just jump out. Well, by the time I got to the crummy I was going about twenty-five miles an hour already. And he couldn't jump out. He would have been injured. And by that time I saw all of his crew, who were standing by the crummy, yelling and hollering. So I stopped and looked around, and sure enough here he was. He jumped out of the back of the truck. I said, "You okay?" and he went "Humph!" Kind of a major [hoople] moment. [Laughs]

Another time was, when we were eating lunch on the [Moorsky Slump], which is just off the Rogue River about twenty miles east of Gold Beach. And among, in our crew was the supervisor off the staff of Ron McCormack and Bob Ettner and I think Mel Greenup and I think Ted Stubblefield; and we were deciding whether we were going to do some logging or do some activities in the vicinity of this unstable ground. And so we sat on the edge of this slump—large slump now, this is several hundred acres—and we were eating lunch and chit-chatting, and, to show you how unstable the land was, about a hundred yards away all of a sudden we started hearing limbs cracking. And if you've been in the western forest before, you know that a tree's going over. So in the matter of a few seconds limbs cracked and crashed, and then all of a sudden we heard this horrendous boom when the tree hit the ground. And it scared us a little bit, but I guess it wasn't too dangerous.

Then, other moments, I don't know. During the Silver Fire, in the morning... Just how many acres had burned by that time I don't know, but we were in Indigo Prairie country, and that's just on the north side of Indigo Creek. And the weather cleared; it had [been in an] inversion for about a week, so the smoke was all down low and the fire wasn't progressing very much. But that morning a cold front passed through. And so the sky cleared. And all of a sudden, within a matter of fifteen to twenty minutes, the fire just started raging in the Indigo Valley along Indigo

Creek, and within an hour it had burned a section of land. Burned the land, you know, it burned the trees. It was a crown fire that consumed about a section of land. So that's some of the exciting, a couple of the exciting moments.

LW: [Inaudible question]

EG: Oh yes. We did recovery. Watershed restoration I believe it's called. We learned a lot there. But it doesn't seem to stick very well with the people that follow, or we weren't able to pass this information on very well. We continue to do recovery following forest fires. Well, in a few cases it is necessary or maybe valuable to do some of recovery things like putting straw mulch out, planting grass seed in the forest; things that are a little bit contrary to what might go on naturally. Most of them really don't seem to have a lot of positive effects. Sometimes we bring in weed species with bringing straw mulch in. And we bring in species like grasses that aren't really adapted to the forest land. Overall, the land after fire can pretty well take care of itself. May look barren for a while, but not long. There will be things growing, and as long as you don't impact the soil or compact the soil and disturb the surface very much, the water still continues to soak in. And I think we learned quite a bit of that on the Silver Fire, where we saw that stream flows of Silver Creek following a fire were a little higher the next summer, with great water quality.

LW: [inaudible question]

EG: [Laughs] Actually it was right about the time of the Silver Fire that we were having tree sitters. It was on the Gold Beach district, and that was also on the north fork of Indigo Creek. It's kind of interesting to see how the tree sitters operate. They have a little support staff on the ground, and ropes leading up to a piece of plywood perched up in the tree, maybe anywhere from seventy-five to a hundred feet up, maybe a little more than a hundred. And then you'll have somebody sitting up there. Doesn't seem like a very pleasant job. But they seem to revel, the tree sitters seem to revel in their work. And I'm not criticizing the individual tree sitters, because they believe they're doing the right thing.

LW: [inaudible remarks]

EG: Yeah. Earlier you mentioned, has the Forest Service changed much, and that's probably one aspect of the national forest, particularly here in the West, and maybe in other places too, how people, our citizenry, believe and feel and act in trying to make change in the national forest. The tree sitters are probably one example of that. Which we certainly didn't have back in the 1970s, or even maybe the early '80s. But then, once people became more active in this, it became quite a show at times. And had quite an effect upon our management.

LW: [inaudible question]

EG: Not a lot. I was able to take a reporter... my wife Bobbie and I took Ketzell Levine from National Public Radio out, and we took an overnight camping trip into the Biscuit Burn area, and there we were able to see how things were well-burned but how the different plants and trees were recovering from being burned. The Kalmiopsis flower was sprouting, and many of the other herbs and shrubs were probably healthier as a result of the fire.

LW: [inaudible question, apparently regarding what EG might do at Folklife Festival]

EG: Yeah, we could bring... Sure. I've been thinking a lot about that. We could bring a large log back there. Be a good... Something good from the Pacific Northwest region. They'll probably think of wildlife and birds and animals, but really, the ground is probably some of the most important part of the whole forest, and we could bring a rotten log and maybe some soil, and have a demonstration that would show how the little animals and the critters get along with large wood. And decomposing. How the forest floor operates as a system. I think that might be an idea, a pretty good idea. You wouldn't need a lot of space for something like that, and you could have a rotting log and some ground, soil, and you could have a microscope, you could have things, displays, of the life activity in the soil under a microscope.

LW: [Inaudible remark]

EG: You could do, yeah, the dissection of a log. You could bring several logs, and when one wore out you could put on a new one, or a new rotten log.

LW: [inaudible question]

EG: Well, we had a classification of logs; one being sound and green; and five, I think it was, being well-decomposed. So we'd want something that was rather decomposed, maybe a class three or four. We wouldn't want it like a shadow on the ground, where the log had already melted into the ground. Yeah, I think that might be a pretty good plan.

LW: [Inaudible remarks]

EG: Yeah, that's kind of an interesting statement. I guess the part that I really enjoyed most about it was the quality of air and the chance to sit on a log while I ate my lunch. Caring for the land, I guess what it really means is that we, sort of like this bit with the garbage where you haul your garbage out and leave no trace. I think as long as we can leave as little trace as possible on the land, or in the forest, or on the range, that we probably pass the land on to our future generations in a condition that they'll enjoy it, and can use it.

LW: [Inaudible remarks]

EG: They're national treasures, and that's an unqualified 'yes' on that. The public lands are certainly some of the most valuable parts of the ecosystem that have been preserved. And a lot of this is in Bureau of Land Management; some is in national forest. But these are the lands that... These are the lands where people go on vacation. These aren't destination resorts; these are lands where you can sort of make your own vacation. In amongst the mountains, the prairies, the forest.

LW: [Inaudible remarks]

EG: Well, I hope that the national conscience, or the national sense, is, retains or maintains the value or the sense that these national lands are valuable. There's a lot of thinking in certain sectors of society that these things could be, these lands could be privatized. However, once they're privatized they're not public anymore and they're not really a public resource as much as they would be. It's a bit like *The Tragedy of the Commons*, which is a book by Barry Commoner a few years back, who lamented about the loss of public lands or certain ecosystems for access to the public. And I think that would be something that we can carry into the next century; later in this century, the next century, we could bring that on, I think we would do well.

[Scene changes to EG outdoors in a clearing, standing next to a tree]

EG: how do you like our large woody material? Actually it's not a large woody material, it's just a rotting alder. This is a red alder that died about ten years ago, and we've watched it go through the various stages of decomposition, from losing its bark, to the woodpeckers working on it. One year it hosted a nest of downy woodpecker. And then after that the pileated woodpeckers in a period of about four years just literally chewed the tree apart. We have a sample of some of their work right here. [Points to a piece of rotting wood lying at the foot of the tree] I just picked this up off the ground and a deer mouse ran out from under it. What I wanted to illustrate was how valuable these old, dead, rotting pieces of wood are for other parts of the ecosystem, where they contribute to the microbes in the soil, to the birds that live in the dead tree, to other insects and fungus that are decomposing this alder tree. This is a good example of the living tree, or the living part of a dead tree. [Camera pans to show parts of the tree in detail]

END OF INTERVIEW