

Interview with Al Levno, by Max Geier, September 12, 1996, 1 pm in the Corvallis Forest Sciences Laboratory [USFS]. Transcribed by Jeff Prater

After a couple years as an undergrad student in forestry at Washington State University, Al Levno made his way as a “young, green kid” to the Andrews Forest in 1963 where he became a research technician for Jack Rothacher and Dick Fredriksen running the experimental watershed studies and anything else that needed doing. He was noted for his high standards for data quality and strong work ethic, which he passed on to the many people who worked for him over the years. He also left an important legacy of photography in the forest of both technical documentation and more artistic genres.

Al Levno: Standard format with questions, sub-questions?

Max Geier: Well, no standard questions. I’m trying to interview people from various phases of the Andrews’ history. This is a general interview about your background and specific projects in the Andrews’ system. Sometime in the future we are going to get together down there at the Andrews and go through some of the pictures.

Levno: Yeah, that’d be really good. [Levno was HJA’s main photographer for decades.]

Geier: And there might be a critical time in the project when we have more specific information needs that we can figure out later.

Levno: I think that’s a real good idea to get together with several people talking. That could be a really good set-up.

Geier: To get people familiar out there familiar with things from the 1960’s.

Levno: Oh, yeah!

Geier: People from 60’s and 70’s together, with those who arrived more recently.

Levno: Uh-huh.

Geier: First impressions can have a lasting influence. If someone goes out there now, they can see those big facilities and have a different view than the early days.

Levno: Yeah, that’s for sure.

Geier: Let’s start out with when you started working in the Andrews in the early 1960’s with Jack Rothacher.

Levno: Jack Rothacher and Dick Fredriksen were the watershed team at the time.

Geier: Tell me.

Geier: I'd thought you could tell me a little about your background before you got there.

Levno: Okay. I came to the Andrews in 1963 and I was just a young, green kid. I didn't have a college degree at the time, and came from the dry parts of Washington state, the Palouse country. I worked in Eugene and picked up a job at the Andrews, which was more in my line of training.

Geier: What as your background at this point?

Levno: It was a couple of years of forestry at Washington State University.

Geier: Okay.

Levno: Washington State was not an accredited university at that time, and I was forced to discontinue with college my sophomore year. I came to this part of the world and found forestry jobs were plentiful here, even without a degree. I went up to the Blue River Ranger District, and sure enough, got a job as a research technician for Rothacher and Fredriksen.

Geier: You moved here before you actually got a job here?

Levno: Yeah.

Geier: Kind of unheard of.

Levno: Well, kind of shuffled around in Washington and there wasn't much forestry or nursery work in the wintertime, so I moved to Eugene where that kind of thing was going on regularly.

Geier: So then, you were a research technician for that period?

Levno: Yeah, I was a research technician for the watershed group, and as I started work as a watershed tech, I learned the ropes of the gauging stations and how they worked. After that [early phase], I was left on my own. Dick Fredriksen and I were the only personnel at the Andrews, just he and I. In '63 he left to finish his degree here in Corvallis, and I was the only person at the Andrews in those early years, the only one actually working there and living there.

Geier: '63-'68?

Levno: '63-'67, something like that. Just a one little office in the ranger station, one little beam balance and a drying oven, and a pick-up [truck]. Also, a big Airedale terrier. He and I "belonged" to the Andrews at the time. For three days, we'd check the instruments to see if everything was going alright, and also deal with the forest at the time.

Geier: Did you live there year-round?

Levno: Yeah, I lived there year-round in the house we had. The research station had the house built there. Jack Rothacher was the first to use the house, and Dick Fredriksen was the second. I used the trailer on the compound, the one in the back, and I used the office in the house.

Geier: Where was the house located?

Levno: The house, I guess we still have. Some Andrews' person is in there now. It is the second one above the ranger station.

Geier: I was talking to Roy Silen about when he was living out there during the '50's.

Levno: Oh, yeah. There are plenty of stories. Roy was out there. He lived in a little old trailer and he hardly got to town, I guess, and the visitors would come out during the weekend and go fishing with him. His paychecks built-up and built-up, and he never went to town. He'd set them up on the window, and in September he came back, and they were eaten up by mice. (Laughter). He'd had to get half-a-year's paychecks reissued.

Geier: After the tourist season, people out there would invite each other to dinner. Do you recall anything about that when you were there?

Levno: When I was up there with my wife and three kids, the relationship was great up there at that time. There were a lot of community get-togethers and pot lucks. It was a great time to be up there.

Geier: This was during the Blue River dam construction?

Levno: That was just starting when we first got there. The town was much bigger than it is now. It had a meat market. There were a couple of sawmills, and probably a hundred families in the area. This was just at the completion of the Cougar [Dam] Reservoir. There was no place to rent. People were looking for houses in that area. It was a pretty close community.

Geier: Year-round residences not too much?

Levno: Yeah, two, three saw mills were operating in Blue River at that time, and three or four stores. A good grocery store and a meat market. We did all our shopping there as opposed to now, when we have to make a trip to town and buy our groceries.

Geier: Where's the nearest town now, Springfield?

Levno: Springfield. Eugene, Yeah.

Geier: Do you recall when you first got there what your first impressions were of the place?

Levno: Well, it was completely strange to me because I was from eastern Washington. When I graduated from high school, there were 13 kids in my graduating class, something like that. (Laughter)

Geier: I went out there on to do some research in Lane County. Who got you into the Andrews?

Levno: I think that was Dick Fredriksen, at the time. That was an interesting interview that we had. I guess Dick advertised for people in the local Eugene paper, and later I found it was a strictly illegal undertaking for a federal job. There were 13-14 that applied. He took everybody out to view the Andrews. Ultimately, he gave everybody a test to see how they would do. That was not Forest Service policy at the time. We went around to all the sites, and at that time, they were clearcutting Watershed 1 with the skyline crane, which was a Swiss [Wyssen] company, to 100% log this 237-acre watershed, without [a traditional use of] roads. They ran the skyline the length of this watershed. With crossing-lines, it was a pretty unique experience. They were just beginning operations when I was there. The final stop was on the steep hill next to the yarder.

Geier: So, it was confined to clearcutting the trees we had in Andrews?

Levno: Yeah, the Swiss had smaller trees. They rigged up a bigger [scale] system to get the big timber that we had. There was the flat [on top], and the yarder was on the hill near the top of the hill, a real steep hill. Dick suggested the 13-14 people go look at the yarder. (Laughter) This was the final test of endurance: all 13 of us started out, and I was real slow. Some charged up the hill. It was a real steep climb. Pretty soon, they all wore out and were sitting there panting. I kept right on going, right there to the top. Don't know if that made a difference, if I got the job or not, but it was sure an interesting time.

Geier: All the people doing it together?

Levno: It was a wild deal.

Geier: You were up there with just your family and your dog? [Once Levno started new job]

Levno: The family and dog and the whole forest. I was the local representative for the PNW at that time. OSU at that time was not involved with the forest, anyway.

Geier: What did you think the role of the experimental forest was at that time?

Levno: Bob Mealey was the ranger [Blue River R.D.] at the time, and Bob and I actually lived quite close to each other, and we got along pretty well. The attitude at the ranger station at that time when Dick was there, was not at all like it is now. It was very different. They were very jealous of the experimental station, and they thought it was an extra amount of trouble. They were actually itching to get into the experimental forest and cut those "decadent" old-

growth trees out of there. At that time it was a restricted area, and we were doing experimental cutting. We weren't cutting at the rate of the district at the height of the "glory days" during the sixties. I think that really bothered them. During those years there was a very different attitude about cooperative efforts between the station and the district. They were really "put out" with being blessed with an experimental forest in their midst, and did what they could to let us know that.

Geier: Do you get any sense that attitude translated into the people around Blue River? Did they have an idea what that was all about?

Levno: At that time, I don't think that was much of an issue. Everyone was logging and working in the mills or on the dam [Cougar], so the experimental forest was, pretty much, just a hole-in-the-wall at that point.

Geier: Because it was restricted? I'm not sure if you meant that in the sense that people couldn't do much about cutting, because they didn't have much access to it?

Levno: Yeah, the forest [Willamette NF] really didn't have much access to it. They were depending on the layout at that time. My general feeling was they would love to get in there and do a lot more cutting, rather than wait for a research proposal to do an experimental cut.

Geier: Didn't it strike you as unusual at that time? From what you had seen before?

Levno: No, at that time it was a nice place and the main emphasis was the experimental forest. We thought we ought to have one type of logging operation going so we could demonstrate the different types of logging systems. The watershed program was just beginning to come on line. We had three watersheds [Watersheds 1, 2 and 3], and then, we were thinking of instrumenting the High-15 watershed [Watersheds 6-8], a second set of experimental watersheds.

Geier: Did you get any sense of perceptions about the Andrews at that time?

Levno: These were really low years, and there wasn't anybody there. There was some talk about disbanding the Andrews Forest at that time.

Geier: I was going to ask about that. I've heard you mention that, but I wasn't too clear when that was? [Disestablishment of HJA-EF was discussed by Forest Service in 1960s.]

Levno: That was in the early sixties. It was really about, just a really low amount of effort there.

Geier: The researchers didn't see it as something they should get involved in or promoting?

Levno: There was some concern with budget cuts. This laboratory [U.S. Forest Service Forestry Sciences Laboratory in Corvallis] was just being built at that time, and completed the emphasis.

The idea was that people needed to be here, at the center of interest and education and OSU. So, people were leaving the woods and going to work in the big labs. Maybe I was the first.

Geier: Ted mentioned there was more focus on laboratory research?

Levno: Yeah, that's true. This laboratory was built with dozens of wet labs.

Geier: What was your initial involvement with the people of OSU?

Levno: There was a few, like Eric Forsman. Maybe you should talk to him about an interview. He was really instrumental in our research when I started there in the sixties and when we started our research on the Andrews [Forsman started his research at the Andrews on northern spotted owls in the 1970s]. There was Jay Gashwiler, which would be another person. He was a small mammal biologist, and I think he was associated with OSU, but he is pretty much on his own and working his own little program. He had a lot of trouble getting support from the district, and there was many a time he would come in and complain about not getting any support.

Geier: What was your role in relation to the people working out there on the forest?

Levno: To just kind of visit with them and see how they were doing, and to help them out. Just kind of a cooperator, but just someone who was also doing research on the ground.

Geier: Did they expect you to volunteer to maintain any equipment that they put in?

Levno: No. They didn't have much equipment at that time. That was in the days when the instruments were clocks and you went around and wound them. Someone needed to be there on a weekly basis.

Geier: Did you get a sense of any people at that time getting together to work on the Andrews?

Levno: No, I think that was all the IBP, when that started. [IBP at HJA-EF, 1970-1976]

Geier: Forsman and Gashwiler weren't really involved with each other. They happened to just be doing research there?

Levno: I doubt if they were really aware of each other.

Geier: I'm curious about the impact of living year-round on a site like that with your family. You reported back to people in Corvallis, I assume.

Levno: Yeah, it was a very isolated situation, and I think once or twice a week we'd get a call from Corvallis, and sit and talk about what you were doing. You were out on your own. There was that feeling of just me and my dog being alone out there on the forest, walking around,

running around, and looking at the logging operations going on. I'd keep the instrumentation going on the watershed.

Geier: You stayed out there for a long time. Did it ever occur you to go somewhere else? What were your long-range goals at this time?

Levno: I found the work so interesting and variable, with the seasons, that I became engrossed. What was going on out there was a wonderful opportunity, and I began to pick up so much from the different aspects. It was always changing. Whether the seasons or jobs, things were always changing. I had a chance to leave the Andrews and be with more people here in Corvallis, and to finish my education, finish my bachelor's degree in computers. That was in '68, I think.

Geier: Let's get to the goal.

Levno: The first thing that happened is this eastern Washington guy [Levno] got caught out there in the Christmas floods of '64. Dick Fredriksen was with me, and we were taking grab samples by hand [water] in the three watersheds [1-3]. That was important because they had just been treated [clear-cut, roads built], and it was really important to get fresh samples. That included going out every three hours around the clock, and of course, it's always dark in the wintertime. You climb out through the trees, shine your flashlight, the trees are falling down, you get down on that board [plank across stream in flume area], lay down and dip your milk bottle into the stream, and get a fresh sample. Then go back, get three hours of sleep, and do it all again.

We were doing that in '64, and things were getting pretty intense. We went out to get the 1 o'clock samples on the 21st of December at 1 o'clock in the morning, got to our watershed, it was raining, the wind was blowing, and we were concerned about being out there. When we got to our watershed we were even more concerned about being out there. I looked up and there was this big fog and steam trail, and there was this big, huge pile of debris and logs where the crossing of the stream was. We got really concerned and thought we ought to get the hell out of that place. And we got back down the road, and halfway between [watersheds] 3 and 1 and another debris slide, we came down from up there. It [slide] blocked us in, and this one was 10-12 feet deep with mud and rocks. We tried to climb over it, leave the car there and walk over it, but it was too wet and sloppy, so we were kind of trapped. So, we decided to go back to the other slide at Watershed 3, park our car, and walk across that slide. We climbed on the pile, and some more debris came down. We got across that, and Lookout Creek was just roaring. You could hear the big boulders just roaring throughout the night; boom, boom. There was an old log bridge for logging purposes. It's gone now. We crossed that bridge and climbed up, must have been 1,000 feet up to the upper road on the other side. I remember trees were coming down.

Geier: You were trying to get into an area that was a little safer?

Levno: We were trying to get back to the road. We knew there was a road on the other side of the Andrews. There were several landslides in there, and I must have almost fallen in a couple of them. I think Dick [Fredriksen] must have grabbed me and pulled me back. I had my glasses at that time, they were all fogged up, and I couldn't see. (Laughter) I think he grabbed me by the scruff of the neck a couple of times.

Geier: This was 1 o'clock, 2 o'clock in the morning?

Levno: This was at 2, yeah. Around 4 o'clock we head back to the McKenzie Highway, and couldn't figure out why no one was coming to look for us. We found out why: the flood waters had completely overtopped the highway and stranded others out there. We tried to wade the flood waters to get back to the other side of the flood and back down to Blue River and the house. Couldn't do it. Dick was a big, tall, strapping guy, six-foot-six, or something like that, I'm only barely six foot. He was leading the way and charging down the slopes. All of a sudden, this dog comes by, was swimming and couldn't make it, so he grabbed the dog by the tail, and Dick said, "We can't make it." (Laughs) We came and spent the rest of the night in a farm house there. I can't remember how we got home. About 10 o'clock [a.m.] we were able to get across.

Geier: You didn't hear any warnings that this was coming?

Levno: No. We were out doing our jobs and we knew that there was a storm coming, but we didn't think it would be something like that. That was my first real winter out there and it was quite an experience.

Geier: That was your first winter there?

Levno: That was an experience for someone from the east side to get caught in that much rain. I could go on for hours about snow travel in the early years, snow machines that were coming along that we thought we needed to get into the Andrews. We rented out and tried to run these contraptions, but it was a comedy of errors. We used snow-cats and had to go to bigger machines, because our snow is so heavy and so soft. The little snowmobiles would have fallen right down in there. To get to the point of when we got our first snow-cat was a real experience.

Geier: When did you?

Levno: The director finally bought us a snow-cat, the director for the PNW Station. It might have been the early 70's.

Geier: Before then you were going by skis?

Levno: Snowshoes and skis. We were trying different approaches, so this one year when we started our High-15 watershed studies, we had 7-day, wind-up clocks that had to be rewound up every seven, eight, nine days. I think I did five hundred miles in on snowshoes that year.

Geier: How much snow they get up there each year?

Levno: The climate is extremely variable in the Andrews, and maybe that is good and bad. These big events brought home the importance of research, particularly in the watershed field. This flood really pointed some of the problems [with forest management]. A big flood like this draws more attention to [forest hydrology and disturbance events].

Geier: What are the standards for the weather forecaster? You worked through six or ten storms?

Levno: Yeah, we knew that there was a storm on the way, but not a major flood.

Geier: Was there a more, in the first years, of course, was there a more typical routine of how things had changed from season-to-season?

Levno: That '64 flood, was towards the front-end of a wet-snow accumulation period. I was always there, having lived throughout those first years, 65, 66, 67, where we had 10, 15, 20 feet of snow on the average [in high elevation areas], into the program in the '70s, and then, there was nothing. Drought, as far as snow and weather. Very sparse for a couple of years.

Geier: Then we get into the IBP period. You came up here to Corvallis in '68?

Levno: Yeah.

Geier: What was your level of involvement?

Levno: With the Andrews?

Geier: Yeah.

Levno: At that time we got involved a lot more with the IBP program, but our program was also involved with another set of watersheds down on the South Umpqua River [Coyote Creek, WS 1-4], and then, we took over watershed studies in the Bull Run area [Fox Creek, WS, 1-3]. My job was to keep those three areas running. About every three weeks I made it down to the Andrews.

Geier: Who did you work with when you came up there?

Levno: The same people

Geier: Okay.

Levno: There was a group of hydrologists who came up from the city of Portland. They needed another person to service the gauges down on the South Umpqua with automatic recorders,

and required a lot more work from here. The Andrews was one site for us, Ros Mersereau replaced me at the Andrews, and that gave me the choice of leaving or staying there. I chose to come to Corvallis to be closer to the college. Ros then replaced me. I think that was in '67 or '68.

Geier: Where at the college did you work?

Levno: Forestry was not where I wanted to go in my general science career. I concentrated on fisheries.

Geier: Do you recall what lead you in that direction?

Levno: Well, it just what didn't seem to fit in with what we were doing. I thought I'd like to get involved with the water program more. Maybe biology.

Geier: Getting caught in the flood kind of changed the career path.

Levno: Yeah, right.

Geier: So, when did you finish up here?

Levno: Oh, it was a long haul. It didn't happen. Too much work to do. I had been working on two night classes. I finally took a year off and the group paid for most of it. We got a different experience than being there on the Andrews, to pull back and try to get some formal education. I'd been there so long, I got involved with the construction and maintenance of the watersheds, which naturally carried over into building of the compound, to maintain the whole facilities and helping that program and being the person on the ground, as I had been the point person on the watersheds. [Planning and construction of campus in present site during 1970s-80s, beginning with basic utilities and array of trailers and barns/sheds, evolved to first-class facility in 1990s.]

Geier: You mentioned the IBP program changed the kind of people that came out there, and their interactions with the place. How would you perceive the interaction with the Andrews as a result? In other words, did you see changes happening?

Levno: Yeah, it was a real radical change. There was one or two of us on the Andrews always, then, all the sudden 15-100 people showed up and were living in trailers and camps. They set up camps on the Andrews. It was really quite interesting. I perceived it as a good thing. I don't know the district's reactions. They had some hard times with that, this influx of kids. It was during the hippy days, you could say. If you went swimming anywhere in the Andrews, you didn't wear clothes. I remember at one of our meetings Jerry said, "Well, we need to clean up our act a bit, better not skinny-dip right out in public places." It was a radical change. [More traditional culture of U.S. Forest Service/Blue River Dist., struggled with the cultural changes.]

Geier: The community was probably going through some changes at that time, with the logging industry?

Levno: Yeah, they were going through a change. Here, university people are showing up and at all times of the night, going out to check bats and owls and driving state cars. They [local citizens] were a little alarmed with what was going on.

Geier: Was there any pressure in the form of protests to the district or anything?

Levno: No, there were just a couple of complaints to the ranger station with people that filtered down to us.

Geier: Who were you working with at the ranger station at that time?

Levno: It got a lot better when Bob Mealey left. I can't remember when Mike Kerrick came in, but that was a real change.

Geier: I think Kerrick came in around '70.

Levno: There was that Archer fellow just before that.

Geier: At the Andrews then?

Levno: No, but when Kerrick got there, the research people had a lot more experience and results to connect with. By the time Steve Eubanks got there, and he was a major turning point. He went out and put some the ideas we had into practice. I think that was a real change in the attitudes of the Willamette National Forest.

Geier: Can you think of any staff level changes that took place here?

Levno: At the Andrews or in our operation?

Geier: At the district. People you might have day to day contact with?

Levno: Steve Eubanks was the biggest one. Mike Kerrick was a big influence. It definitely got better after the Mealey years. Not that I had any problem. But he sure was a gruff old fart.

Geier: Sounds like there was quite a generation gap. Scientists coming down that were young, but you had older guys in the district?

Levno: I remember one time he [Mealey] got after Jerry Franklin. Jerry came down and he had a little trailer up on the compound. He'd been out, and he normally did work out in the higher elevations in Washington or somewhere. He didn't shave one morning. Bob [Mealy] saw him, and made him return and shave his beard off. So, he ran a real tight compound.

Geier: That must have been a real nightmare out there, having 80-100 people doing work. I'm thinking about the town of Blue River.

Levno: Yeah, we had a couple trailers on the forest, but most of people were going through Blue River to get a soda-pop or something. It really didn't help out the community that much.

Geier: Was there any kind of bar where the people would hang out after work?

Levno: Yeah, but, maybe for a little while. It wasn't a real good hang out spot for researchers themselves.

Geier: Sounds a lot like they were avoiding the town.

Levno: Almost to a point of avoiding the townspeople.

Geier: You mentioned there was kind of a tension because of the younger, "hippy" research group. Were people cautious about going into the town?

Levno: Probably were cautious. I don't think that there was much interaction with the town. I think that's starting to deteriorate [relations] from the town now. Maybe they resent building a big facility up there and not using the local facilities.

Geier: You probably mentioned earlier that they didn't seem to realize it was there.

Levno: Yeah.

Geier: Kind of goes both ways. If you look at the 1970s-80s period, what would you see as the more significant accomplishments in terms of the kinds of projects in which you were involved?

Levno: Well, I don't know. The watershed program kind of took a hit. We lost our leadership with Jack Rothacher retiring, Dick Fredriksen got sick with Alzheimer's disease, and we were kind of short on leaders in the hydrology program.

Geier: What time period was this?

Levno: This was when the IBP was really going strong, and then, the switch over to the LTER program happened. Drought situations and weather with no snow falling. I think the watershed program, lost a lot of strength, came almost to a standstill. In fact, we started closing down a lot of gauging stations. Very little interest. Against my supervisor's advice, I kept a couple of them going. Just recently, in the last four or five years, there was an upswing in the people, Julia Jones and Gordon Grant, who had international and national-scale interests. They were keeping records going [especially South Umpqua/Coyote Creek], and they had the support to do that.

Geier: Long-term, continuous record keeping turned out to be really valuable. This is the same period 70's to 90?

Levno: Yeah, the 70's were okay, and we had some IBP and LTER projects. Kind of a maintenance program.

Geier: This was kind of a group-like program.

Levno: Yeah. We learned all we could learn from these watersheds, and they are very expensive to maintain. In the watershed program, those were the declining years of activity and maintenance. Then, all the sudden, "boom," it exploded, particularly after the flood [1996].

Geier: How did your role change from the 70's until the present?

Levno: Well, I went from the officer-in-charge of the Andrews, came up here and gained a lot of experience, and, to a degree, just carrying on the watershed program along with Bull Run and the Andrews. I actually kept that watershed program kind of going in the Andrews.

Geier: You keep a boat down on the McKenzie. Did you spend a lot of time down there?

Levno: Yeah, I love that place. I keep a drift boat down there, and learned how to tie flies on the river. It's pretty nice to take people down and show them how to fish. Show them the river. I enjoyed that very much.

Geier: People come out to the Andrews frequently when they are looking for tours and things like that, but they'll seldom come to visit Portland. Do you think that has worked to the benefit of studies on the Andrews?

Levno: One thing about the Andrews that is really beneficial, is just its location in the Cascades. If you go down farther south in the Cascades, it's pretty hot. Steep hills, and then if you go north, and there's lots of rain and brush, but at the Andrews a lot of the conditions are just perfect. There's not a whole lot of brush and the stands are open and clean. It's a pretty enjoyable experience to wander around in the woods at the Andrews. If we had that same experimental forest out on the coast, we'd have all this salmonberry [laughs] or huckleberry or devil's club, or up on Mount Rainer. [Heavy undergrowth makes it harder to travel/experiment.]

Geier: Is there much involvement from the folks at Eugene?

Levno: Not Eugene particularly. Not as much as there is with Corvallis. But it's just a real pleasant place to be right along the McKenzie. The streams are a nice size, and the big trees and the level terraces. You don't really have to work very hard. In the Coast Range, you're either straight up or straight down. (Laughs) It's a pretty friendly place.

Geier: What portion of your time have you spent there from 1963 to the present?

Levno: Right now I think I spend two or three days a week. Of course, in the early years it was every day, you know. A little bit later, every 2 or 3 weeks for awhile.

Geier: Okay, well, I'll be getting back to you again. I've got to leave for another interview now.

Levno: Yeah, sure. Okay.

Interview Ends