4-H Clubs [1]

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by Scott Whisnant, 2006

4-H Clubs [2] grew out of efforts by numerous people to improve educational and other opportunities for farm families in America. In the early years of the twentieth century, clubs were organized in several states that were designed to teach improved farming techniques to boys. Seaman A. Knapp worked for the Cooperative Farm Demonstration Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture [3] (USDA), setting up demonstration farms across the South in an effort to convince farmers to diversify from their absolute reliance on cotton. As part of these efforts, Knapp organized Corn Clubs [4] to teach the latest farming techniques to boys on a one-acre plot. Knapp became convinced of the importance of this youth work, and an agreement was reached between the USDA and the land grant colleges of several states to hire Corn Club agents to oversee this activity. I. O. Schaub, a researcher at North Carolina State College (modern-day North Carolina State University [5]), was the first appointed agent for any state and organized North Carolina's first Corn Club in Ahoskie (Hertford County [6]) in 1909. This was later recognized as the first 4-H Club in North Carolina.

The clubs quickly spread across most of North Carolina, and a demand for clubs for girls developed. In 1911 the first Tomato and Canning Club [7] was organized in Pleasant Garden by Schaub, and Jane S. McKimmon [8] was hired as the state home demonstration agent. Clubs for boys and girls would remain largely separate for some time. Racial segregation was practiced as well. The 4-H Club for African Americans [9] was founded by G. W. Herring in 1914 in Sampson County [10]. The year 1914 saw the passage of the Smith-Lever Act [11] by Congress, which established the Cooperative Extension Service [12] on a more permanent basis. The clubs had expanded to include livestock projects and many crops besides corn. The name 4-H (which stood for head, heart, hands, and health) was officially adopted nationwide in 1911 along with the clover symbol, intended to make goods produced and sold by the youth groups recognizable.

From the inception of the 4-H Clubs, a key purpose of their projects was to make a profit for the boys and girls involved; the funds financed many college educations or farm improvements. The clubs were led by extension agents hired under the Smith-Lever Act. But these agents had many other duties, and in some counties the youth groups languished or did not exist. In 1922 L. R. Harrill [13] was hired in Buncombe County [14] as the first county agent dedicated for 4-H work. The experimental nature of this act is indicated by the fact that his $100 per month salary was paid not by the county or state but by the Vanderbilt family [15]. In 1926 Harrill was hired by Schaub to be the first state 4-H leader. He remained in this office until his retirement in 1963 and became known across North Carolina as "Mr. 4-H." Under his leadership, boys' and girls' activities were merged and common meetings were held at the state level, although some counties kept the sexes separated until after World War II [16]. 4-H Clubs eventually reached all 100 of North Carolina's counties, with Dare County [17] being the last to form a club in 1937. Racial segregation of the clubs did not end until 1964.

Recreation was felt to be important for farm youth, and 4-H provided a good deal of it for its members. The first recorded 4-H camping trip occurred when Harrill took a group of Buncombe County [14] boys and girls to Chimney Rock [18] in 1922. Under Harrill's statewide leadership, Camp Swannanoa [19] in Buncombe County was built on state land in 1929 primarily from funds raised by the 4-H Clubs. Eventually, five other camps were built. The Betsy-Jeff Penn 4-H [20] center near Reidsville was donated to 4-H in 1964 by Betsy Penn and includes year-round facilities quite different from those used in the early years of the camps.

During World War I [21], measures to increase food production inspired a rapid rise in 4-H membership. But the 1920s saw a sharp decline until Harrill's leadership emerged. During the Depression [22], 4-H was an important part of the Live-at-Home [23] program, aimed at making farm families self-sufficient and decreasing the overproduction of cotton and tobacco that further depressed prices for these crops. During World War II, North Carolina 4-H members took part in victory garden programs and other war drives. North Carolina 4-H Clubs raised $3 million for purchase of war bonds and collected over 7 million pounds of scrap iron and steel and over 700,000 pounds of scrap rubber.

Alumni of North Carolina's 4-H Clubs include governors [24], congressmen, university presidents, and many community leaders. During the 1950s, North Carolina boasted the largest number of 4-H members of any state. However, numbers declined in the 1960s, and the program underwent a change in emphasis to reflect the growing urban population. In addition to the traditional agricultural and home economics programs, bicycle safety, water safety, household chemical safety, automobile mechanics, health and nutrition, pollution, neighborhood crime watch, and other programs were added. Through the years 4-H has provided valuable learning experiences for more than 1 million North Carolinians. The projects of the 4-H Youth Livestock Program [25] are an important feature of the North Carolina State Fair [26] each year.

References:

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