4-H History Timeline

Late 1890's Throughout the nineteenth century, rural America set the social tone for the country. As the century turned, young people were moving to cities, drawn by the potential for jobs. They saw no future in laboring behind a plow. The atmosphere of economic prosperity was darkened by the nagging concern for the future generation of rural children.

Liberty Hyde Bailey at Cornell University linked youth to nature and the rural environment.

O. J. Kerns, Illinois Agricultural Experiment Station, founded Farmers' Institutes to introduce farm and home topics and comparative classes for rural youth.

Will B. Otwell, working Farmers' Institutes in IL, offered premiums to boys for best corn yields.

1901 A.B. Graham, a school principal in Ohio, began to promote vocational agriculture in rural schools in out-of-school "clubs."

1902 Graham formed a club of boys and girls with officers, projects, meetings, and record requirements. He sought assistance of the Ohio Agricultural Experiment Station and Ohio State University. His clubs are considered the founding of 4-H.

The club concept was adopted in Iowa by O.H. Benson in Wright County and Jessie Field Shambaugh in Page county. Benson and Field designed a 3-leaf clover symbol.

Wallaces' Farmer magazine sponsored contests for raising corn from high grade seed corn.

Seaman Knapp was hired by USDA to promote better farming methods in the South. His greatest work was the demonstration of methods of fighting the boll weevil in Texas. He used demonstration plots to show that applying theory and technique is a useful way of getting new information to people.

1903 Knapp's work in Texas resulted in the creation of the USDA Office of Cooperative Demonstration Work.

A.F. Meharg was hired as a demonstration agent at Mississippi State College by the General Education Board (a philanthropic arm of Standard Oil). William Hall Smith was hired by Meharg, who picked up the emerging youth programs in the Midwest to work with youth in the south.

Meharg was "hired" by Knapp to work for USDA, giving him the opportunity to use the franking privilege to provide educational materials, bulletins, and seed

corn to Smith as he worked with young people.

1904 John F. Haines introduced corn clubs and corn-growing contests in Hamilton County, Indiana.

G.C. Adams introduced corn-growing in Newton County, Georgia, and W. B. Merritt made it a state wide activity.

Cap. E. Miller in Keokuk County, Iowa, sponsored a county organization of boys and girls with officers and educational programs.

Miller's plans fostered many of the teaching tools of today's 4-H program, including life skills and learning-by-doing through projects, group meetings, and exhibits. Community service projects provided active learning interaction between youth and adults and encouraged youth to set and accomplish goals.

Otwell's Illinois exhibit at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition created a great deal of interest in the idea of working with young people

1905 E.C. Bishop in Nebraska was encouraging work with corn growing, sewing, and baking projects in York County. He organized the work into Nebraska Boys Agricultural Association (exhibited corn and garden products and held livestock judging contests) and Nebraska Girls Domestic Science Association (exhibited sewing and cooking and held contests in which they judged "articles of sewing, handwork, and cooking"). A purpose of the Nebraska Associations was "...to educate the youth of the county, town, and city to a knowledge of their dependence on nature's resources, and to the value of the fullest development of hand, head, and heart...."

From 1905 to 1914, Clubs were started in nearly all states.

1906 Knapp hired Thomas M. Campbell, an assistant of George Washington Carver at Tuskegee, to work with African-American farmers in the south. At the heart of his work was the organization of youth clubs among African-American boys and girls.

1907 By this time, the principle ingredients of 4-H work had been tested. Graham had shown how well young people would respond to organized clubs that introduced them to agricultural science and technology. Otwell's corn contests, with their premiums and equipment prizes, demonstrated the value of incentives to encourage young people to learn.

1908 Oscar B. Martin was appointed by Knapp to coordinate establishing corn clubs using the Mississippi model throughout the south, arranging cooperative agreements, and appointing state leaders.

A Country Life Commission chaired by Bailey was convened.

1909 The work of Meharg and Smith, and recognition by Knapp, established an outline of a cooperative venture between county officials, the state land-grant college and the federal government at the heart of this cooperative venture were agricultural products for young men and women.

A report of the Country Life Commission strongly urged Congress to authorize Agricultural Extension Service through the land grant university system. Although Congress ignored the recommendation, the movement started on its own.

Professor P.G. Holden, superintendent of Iowa Extension, gave A.U. Storins the job of organizing 4-H in schools.

In 1909, USDA outlined a proposal for establishing girls' tomato canning clubs. In 1910, Marie S. Cromer of Aiken County, SC, organized a club using material supplied by the USDA. At the same time, Ella G. Agnew was establishing girls' canning clubs in Virginia. She was the first woman agent appointed by USDA for farmers' cooperative demonstration work. By 1912, 23,000 canning clubs had been organized. Girls' clubs, confined to canning, sewing, baking, and the like, had no such technological goals. Teaching safe and efficient methods of preserving food was a sufficient goal in itself. However, Girls' clubs soon looked at the entire role of women in the home and community.

1911 E.C. Bishop was appointed the first full-time state club leader for Iowa.

1914 - 1917 Passage of the Smith-Lever Act created the Cooperative Extension System.

County agents and local leaders began to organize 4-H clubs. Club meetings and projects were made major requirements.

In 1915, 44 youth in corn clubs each won a trip to the Panama Pacific Exposition at San Francisco. Beef winners in 1916 won trips to the International Livestock Exposition in Chicago. Pig club members were awarded similar trips in 1917.

Gertrude Warren was brought to USDA in 1917 to organize the canning program.

1919 One of the most important meetings in the history of the 4-H movement was held in Kansas City. The general structure of local clubs was firmly established, an expansion of projects was encouraged, relations between club work and vocational education in the schools were defined, and the general principle of local initiative was ratified.

1921 - 1922 Formation of the National Committee on Boys' and Girls' Club Work for the purpose of obtaining private support for club work. Private support provided trips, awards and events outside the scope of public funding.
A team of Iowa Canning Club girls won a national canning contest in 1922. For their achievements, they were awarded a trip to France where they gave canning demonstrations.

1940's - 1950's
In 1948 a group of American young people went to Europe and a group of Europeans came to the United States on the first International Farm Youth Exchange. Out-of-state trips and international exchanges have been highly educational for hundreds of young people in 4-H.

4-H celebrates 50th anniversary in 1952. A US commemorative stamp is issued.

4-H extends into urban areas.

1960's - Now
In recent years the 4-H program has been experiencing two significant trends.

One is that the basic purpose of 4-H is the personal growth of the member. By using 4-H projects as important means for achievement and growth, members build skills they can use the rest of their lives. 4-H educational experiences are built around life skills that center on positive self esteem, communication and decision making. Citizenship and leadership skills, learning how to learn, and the ability to cope with change also are an important part of 4-H educational programs. Life skills are built into 4-H projects, activities, and events that help participants become contributing, productive, self-directed members of a forward-moving society.

The second trend was toward program and organizational coordination, combining 4-H organizations divided by gender and race into a single integrated program. The program also incorporates life skills development into an expanding number of delivery modes. In addition to the core 4-H community club model, youth may participate through urban groups, community resource development, special interest groups, EFNEP nutrition programs, school enrichment, camping and interagency learning experiences.

4-H celebrates its 100th anniversary in 2002.

Today, after more than 100 years, 4-H offers youth opportunities in communications, leadership, career development, livestock, home improvement, and computer technology to 7 million American youth. Programs are found in rural and urban areas throughout the country and similar programs around the world. 4-H will continue to grow and develop with the head, heart, hands, and health of youth.