

A Brief History of Nebraska 4-H

The Beginning...Corn-Growing Clubs and Head, Heart and Hands

In the late 1890's and early 1900s, 4-H programs began across the country in response to young people and their need for a better agricultural education. No one individual is credited with establishing the 4-H program nationally. Rather, the program was founded through the efforts of several individuals over the course of a few years.

In 1895, E.C. Bishop, a teacher and county superintendent, is credited as introducing Boys and Girls Club Work in German Town near Garland, Nebraska in Seward County, and near Bradshaw in York County in 1898.

Bishop organized school clubs and provided youth with educational materials. In 1903, he and his fellow Lincoln Normal classmate, W.C. Brokaw, organized a corn growing competition for boys from York, Fillmore and Seward counties. This resulted in the Corn Show in 1904.

By 1907, Bishop appealed to the readers of Nebraska Farmers magazine: "Can we find a name or emblem that can be used to refer to both boys and girls?" The answer came from a national source shortly thereafter. The first 4-H emblem came into use nationally in 1907 or 1908 and was designed as a three-leaf clover, standing for head, heart and hands. Hustle was added as the fourth H in 1911 but was later changed to health. In 1908, more than 8,000 boys and girls participated in county contests.

In addition to 4-H's growing popularity in Nebraska, much was happening nationally to strengthen the program. By 1912, 73,000 boys and 23,000 girls nationwide were enrolled in club work. Also in 1912, the USDA created a charter for 4-H. In 1914, Congress passed the Smith-Lever Act, which established the Cooperative Extension Service, of which 4-H is a part. Nebraska was ready. By 1913, county youth workers were already in place. A note from a Gage County youth worker in 1913 talked of Boys and Girls Club picnics with lessons in livestock judging, milk testing and more.

The World War I years added a new dimension to 4-H. Club work became even more important as food and other resources became less abundant. Young people in clubs contributed to the war effort through food production and conservation, canning demonstrations and other efforts. In Nebraska, youth also raised victory gardens and adopted "wheatless" flour and "sugarless" recipes.

The 1920s, 30s and 40s...Global Expansion and National Conferences

Following the war, 4-H crossed the Atlantic and became established in Great Britain, Denmark, Sweden and Norway. It also became more culturally diverse in the United States. By 1923, more than 55,000 African American boys and girls were involved in 4-H clubs. In the late 1920s, the Federal Bureau of Indian Affairs established its own Extension Service and promoted 4-H. Today, youth from all cultures still find opportunities to thrive in 4-H.

The 1920s also were the birth of the 4-H national conferences. National 4-H Club Congress grew out of the Annual National Tours, which began in 1923. The first National Club Camp was held in Washington D.C. in 1927. The delegates were housed in tents near the US Department of Agriculture. The National 4-H pledge and 4-H Motto were officially adopted at this camp.

In the 1930s, the Great Depression again proved the validity of 4-H. Food production and conservation skills learned in 4-H continued to be an asset to youth, their families and communities. When the U.S. became involved in World War II, 4-H youth rose to the cause. They canned, conserved, adopted special recipes and were at the forefront of the war movement with patriotic pledges and more.

I.F.Y.E..., Camps, and More

Following World War II, relief work in Asia and Europe became a major activity of U.S. 4-H clubs. The International 4-H Youth Exchange (I.F.Y.E.) program allowed U.S. youth to meet the people they were helping. The first Nebraska I.F.Y.E. delegate was Helen Oschner Stiling of Madison County who lived and worked with a farm family in Sweden in 1948. Today, nearly 1,000 Nebraska youth have participated in the program, traveling to more than 50 other countries. In addition, thousands of Nebraska families have opened their homes to youth from around the world. In 2000-01, Nebraska hosted youth from Japan, Ukraine, Armenia, Belarus and Moldova.

Since the earliest years, Nebraska 4-H'ers have experienced new adventures and developed lifelong friendships at 4-H Camp. The first organized Boys' and Girls' Camp in Nebraska was in 1912. Seventy-five youth attended the three-day camp at the State Fairgrounds in Lincoln. The first Conservation Camp was held at the Seward Park in 1931.

The "traveling camp crew" was popular with agents and 4-H'ers alike from 1947 to 1974. The three "camp crew" members would load 400 canvas cots, paper plates, craft material, record players, luggage and more onto a truck and travel to eight locations during June and July.

Nebraska's first campsite, the Nebraska State 4-H Camp at Halsey, was dedicated in 1962. Friends of 4-H from nearly every community in Nebraska contributed in 1976 and the Eastern Nebraska Camp near Gretna in 1982.

Today, approximately 2,500 youth attend traditional 4-H camp in Nebraska annually. Each location offers everything from canoeing and cookouts to mature studies and night hikes. Youth also participate in T.R.U.S.T. courses at each site that promote self-confidence and team-building skills. Because of the quality grounds and staff, adults and non-traditional youth campers also seek out Nebraska's camps for retreats and special programs annually.

In addition to traditional clubs and camps, 4-H impacts youth through School Enrichment. These short-term educational programs, covering topics such as embryology and conservation, may be taught by a teacher or an extension staff member. Because of the quality programs and hard work of extension staff, School Enrichment is one of the fastest-growing areas of 4-H.

And, no history of 4-H would be complete without a mention of the Nebraska State Fair, established in 1869. In the 1890s, school-age youth were first encouraged to exhibit articles. By 1906, the Boys' and Girls' Statewide contest included: corn, wheat, sugar beets, potatoes, manual training, cooking, bread, preservation, needle work and house ornaments. Today, computers, heritage, forestry, rabbits and wildlife are the fastest-growing exhibit areas at the State Fair.

Still Making the Best Better

4-H has a most impressive history. From the corn-growing clubs of the early 20th century to the camps and after-school clubs of today, 4-H continues to help youth become competent, caring citizens of good character.

Judging from its past success and continuing commitment to youth, it is clear that 4-H will continue to do what it has done so well for the past decades...make the best better.

Sources:

"The History of 4-H in Nebraska" by John Orr

The National 4-H Council's Centennial website: www.4hcentennial.org