
4-H History

From an early unorganized beginning, 4-H clubs have developed into a worldwide youth movement. The idea of starting 4-H clubs cannot be credited to one individual or institution. Instead, 4-H has resulted from the ideas and work of many pioneer leaders. Some 29 different individuals have been called the founder of the 4-H program. However, three people seem to have played significant roles in promoting the 4-H movement.

Founders

W. B. Otwell, Macaopin County, Illinois, was an early sponsor of special farm work for youth. In 1900 he distributed quality seed corn among 500 boys who grew and exhibited it for prizes. This work was then taken up by Illinois Farmers' Institutes and the county superintendents of schools.

A. B. Graham introduced modern 4-H club organization and methods in Ohio in 1902. Printed instructions and record sheets were provided so practical farm and home problems could be studied by both boys and girls. In 1904 a state federation of rural school agricultural clubs was formed.

In 1905, O. H. Benson, county superintendent of schools in Wright County, Iowa, worked out a plan of tying farm problems and record keeping in with schoolwork – another significant step toward modern club work. Boys and girls interested in farm work formed clubs and held meetings, picnics, and fairs.

By 1910, the work of farm boys and girls was winning public interest and approval. Several states appropriated funds for Extension work, and newspapers and farm magazines helped spread the news of this new program. The U.S. Congress, realizing the merits of such a program, made funds available in 1914 for promoting a rural youth program. This act, known as the Smith Lever Act, was the foundation of 4-H clubs.

In early years county agents did most of the work supervising the boys and girls in their programs. Agents soon discovered they could not reach large numbers of people alone, so they began to teach volunteer adult 4-H club leaders.

Interest in the 4-H club work by 1920 had gone beyond farm communities. Influential business and farm organization leaders added their support. In 1921, at the suggestion of a member of the United States Department of Agriculture, the National Committee on Boys and Girls Club Work was formed for the purpose of obtaining private support for club work. Private support provided trips, awards, and events outside the scope of public funding.

During its first 80 years, 4-H changed from an organization primarily concerned with improving agriculture production and food preservation to one dedicated to the development of young people.

Additional information about the history of 4-H in the United States can be found at the National 4-H History Preservation Program.

4-H Club Work in Arkansas

The first 4-H club in Arkansas is reported to have been organized in White County in 1908. Under the leadership of R. C. Davidson, a farm demonstration agent, and Miss Lucy Critz, a teacher in the Searcy High School, a boy's corn club was organized with 40 members.

W. J. Jernigan became club agent in December of 1912 before the Smith Lever Act was passed. He continued as state 4-H club agent until his retirement in 1945.

Arkansas 4-H clubs received their real start with passage of the Smith Lever Act which set up the 4-H program as the youth phase of the Agricultural Extension program.

Corn clubs, cotton clubs, and pig clubs were started for boys in the early days in that order. Canning clubs and garden clubs were among the first clubs for girls. These early clubs were tied closely with rural schools with the teacher usually being the leader. Each club carried one project and was a temporary organization. Completion of the project ended the club's function for the year.

Community 4-H clubs have been a good influence on 4-H programs. It has enabled clubs to include all four of the H's (Head, Heart, Hands and Health) in their programs. Also, it marked the beginning of a year-round program in the community. As a result, clubs began to add recreation, safety, wildlife conservation, community improvement, and other activities to their programs.

The Motto– “To Make the Best Better”

The national 4-H club motto, “To make the best better,” was suggested by Miss Carrie Harrison of the USDA. A committee of state and national 4-H leaders accepted this motto in 1912. Although it has been used since that time, it was 1927 before it was adopted nationally at the club leader's conference in Washington, D.C.

Clover Emblem and Name

When O. H. Benson of Wright County, Iowa, joined the Federal Extension staff in 1911, he brought with him a sample club badge which had been used in his home county. It was a three-leaf clover with an “H” on each leaf representing Head, Heart and Hands. Dr. O. Martin, who oversaw club work in the southern states, suggested that another leaf for Health be added. In 1913, at a meeting of state 4-H leaders, the figure “4” was added to the “H.” Today, the 4-H emblem and name are protected by law and belong to the Congress of the United States.



Club Pledge

I pledge my head to clearer thinking

**my heart to greater loyalty my hands
to larger service and my health to
better living**

**for my club, my community, my country
and my world.**

The 4-H club emblem was found to be more effective expressed as a spoken pledge. Several states developed pledges of their own about the club emblem. Finally, in 1927 at the first National 4-H Club Camp in Washington, D.C., state and national club leaders adopted the National 4-H Pledge which is in use today. It was also agreed that members should stand at attention and designate head, heart, hands, and health as the pledge is repeated in unison.