



Country Market

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"The Newspaper That Cares About Rural Life"

The Country Today SECTION



Photos courtesy of UW-Madison Archives

The Clever Clovers 4-H Club in Jefferson County hosted an ice cream social to celebrate June Dairy Month in 1964.

A century after Wisconsin's first 4-H club meeting in Walworth County, the youth organization still aims ...

To make the best better

It's been decades since she was a young 4-H'er, but Mary Kay Merwin's enthusiasm for the organization perhaps best known by its four-leaf clover logo hasn't waned a bit.

"It has been my lifeblood," said Merwin, a past member of Wisconsin's inaugural 4-H club, the Linn 4-H Club in Walworth County.



Merwin

Merwin said she was a shy, naive young girl when she joined 4-H, and it's no exaggeration to say it has changed her life.

"4-H has done everything for me," she said.

She's not alone; 4-H has touched the lives of thousands of people in every corner of the state since it first was offered in Wisconsin 100 years ago this year.

Merwin's passion for 4-H led her to co-chair the Wisconsin 4-H centennial history subcommittee with her neighbor, Ginny Hall. The pair also head up Walworth County's 4-H history committee.

Together, the two women have spent months sifting through old records, newspapers, microfiche and other items. Boxes of memorabilia fill their southeastern Wisconsin homes as they work to compile a timeline depicting the evolution of 4-H in America's Dairyland.

While they've made a lot of progress, Hall said, it seems to be a never-ending endeavor.

"One never knows when you're going to come across some more information," she said.

They also have been recording the stories of 4-H alumni, like many counties and clubs around the state that are developing oral histories through interviews with former 4-H'ers.

"We have really encouraged every county to use this as a celebration of their own," Merwin said, "and to come up with their own set of plans and try to feature those at some sort of event."

Many counties will celebrate the 4-H centennial at their county fair, she said, because "that's when everybody gets together."

Merwin said she has enjoyed every minute of her more than six decades of 4-H involvement during a career that has included working with UW-Extension in Waukesha County, then being hired as the first solo female 4-H agent in Rock County.

In the 1970s, she worked

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as a state 4-H specialist in Texas, then went to the National 4-H Council in Washington, D.C. After that, she took a position at Cornell University on Long Island, where she retired. She moved back to Wisconsin in 2001 and serves on the Wisconsin 4-H Foundation's board of directors.

"4-H has been important to me," said Hall, who was a member during the 1950s in Calumet County.

"I remember my days of demonstrations at the state fair," she said.

Hall said she was able to enroll at UW-Madison thanks to a 4-H scholarship and worked closely with 4-H families as a former Extension home economics agent in Walworth County, retiring in 1989.

"As an Extension home economist, I felt that it was an important part of my job to work with the 4-H'ers," she said.

Hall and Merwin first met when Hall came to Walworth County, where Merwin was a 4-H'er and her parents were general club leaders.

Friends for more than 50 years, they share a fondness for 4-H and an interest in retaining its history.

"The most interesting thing to me is how solid 4-H has remained as a part of the local community and the state over all these years," Merwin said.

First club met in 1914

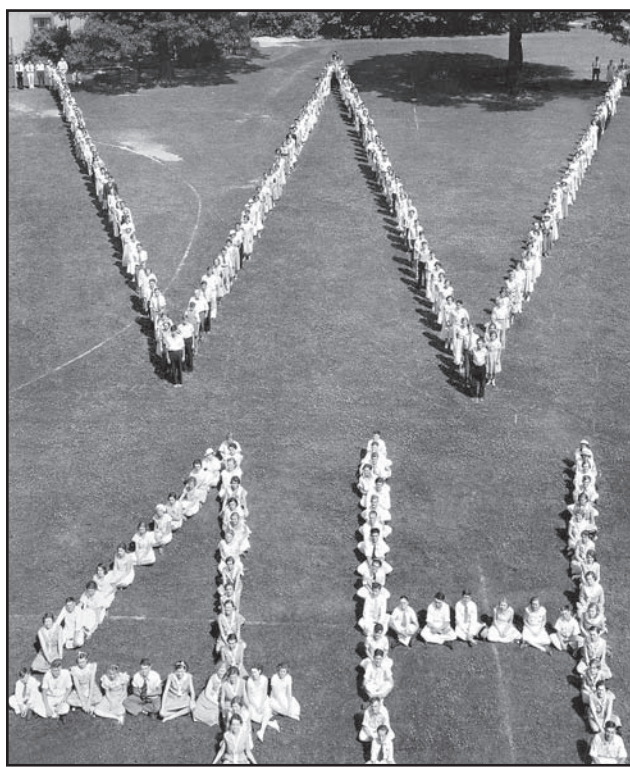
Like her dad, Merwin was a member of Wisconsin's first 4-H club — the Linn 4-H Club in Walworth County.

Her dad signed up for 4-H in the 1930s because they had a softball team, she said. His 4-H record book, found in the attic, revealed to her that he also raised sheep.

"It's really quite unique to think that the first 4-H club is still in existence and has been in existence every year since then," she said.

That's no small feat; Walworth County has had almost 40 different 4-H clubs since 1914, and about 16 clubs remain, she said.

Wisconsin was one of the first states to offer 4-H, Merwin said. Some other early adopters were Texas, Ohio and Iowa.



Delegates spelled out "W 4-H" during the 1933 State 4-H Club Week at UW-Madison. More than 500 youths from around the state will come to Madison later this year for the 94th annual Wisconsin 4-H and Youth Conference.

Efforts to engage rural youths in agriculture began with UW-Madison's hiring of Ransom Asa Moore to do community outreach, particularly to spread the use of hybrid seed corn, Merwin said. Moore did that through the farmers' children.

"He didn't have much luck attracting farmers," Merwin said, "so he handed out seed in schools."

Moore, director of the College of Agriculture Short Course, offered the first county-wide roundup corn show in Richland Center in 1904.

In 1914, Thomas L. Bewick was hired to assist Moore as state 4-H leader, and they took their efforts statewide. Elizabeth Kelley was hired to work with girls on canning and sewing.

Seven young people — four boys and three girls — attended the first 4-H club meeting, held Oct. 30,



4-H members paraded up State Street to the Capitol Square in Madison in the 1950s, carrying signs indicating their places of residence.

For more information about the yearlong celebration of the Wisconsin 4-H centennial or to share a personal 4-H story, visit <http://blogs.ces.uwex.edu/4hcentennial>.

More details about opportunities in Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development can be found at <http://4h.uwex.edu>.

a former Red Cross worker in her early 90s, still lives in Madison and is active in the 4-H centennial celebration, making a \$100,000 endowment to launch a new scholarship fund in her father's honor this year.

The fund will support two scholarships for 4-H'ers attending a Wisconsin college each year in perpetuity, according to Valerie Johnson of the Wisconsin 4-H Foundation board.

The changing face of 4-H

With far fewer full-time farm families and stiff competition from sports and other extracurriculars, 4-H has changed dramatically since 1914.

"Before the 1950s, most of Wisconsin was rural; this was the social activity," Merwin said.

State enrollment stands at more than 35,000 young people in 1,386 community clubs, she said. Another almost 50,000 youths are involved in 4-H through in-school and after-school clubs, day camps, mentoring programs and other opportunities. State 4-H programs also are backed by more than 20,000 volunteers.

4-H remains relevant through more diversity in projects, appealing to non-farm kids through photography, rocketry, youth in government and other areas. More than 130 projects are available, Merwin said.

"It has truly evolved like the country has," she said.

Today, only about 35 percent of Wisconsin 4-H'ers are from farms, while the rest hail from towns, cities and suburbs, she said. That trend is reflected in the Linn 4-H Club, which has about 50 members.

Bewick's daughter, Helen,

"Over the years, that club has evolved from very rural/agricultural to now much more suburban," Merwin said. "That part of Linn Township is on the southern shores of Geneva Lake."

She said a quick glance through almost any listing of past and present community leaders across Wisconsin usually turns up many 4-H alumni.

A recent Tufts University study reinforced the fact that 4-H builds community leaders, as members are more likely than non-4-H'ers to make good choices and contribute to their communities and less likely to engage in risky behavior.

"It's had a big impact, despite funding sometimes going away," Merwin said.

Yearlong celebration set

The centennial year of Wisconsin 4-H is being celebrated throughout this year, beginning March 19 with 4-H members and leaders from throughout the state descending on Madison for Wisconsin 4-H Day at the Capitol.

April is Wisconsin 4-H Statewide Service Month. All local clubs are encouraged to do a community-service project this month, from roadside cleanup to volunteering in a nursing home.

Musical and drama performances, interactive activities and special exhibits will highlight Wisconsin 4-H Day at the State Fair Aug. 5.

A gala celebration will be held during the state 4-H leaders' forum in early-November in Wisconsin Dells. It will be highlighted by the induction of the first 100 people into the new Wisconsin 4-H Hall of Fame.



Young people stood behind the fruits of their autumn harvest sometime in the 1920s.