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# Making the Best Better: 4-H and Rural Anxiety in the Early Twentieth Century

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**Making the best better: 4-H and rural anxiety in the early twentieth century**

By

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of requirement for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: History

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## ABSTRACT

Responding to the problems of the Gilded Age, the early twentieth century was a time of disorder and intense reform. It was during this time that an association known as 4-H made an appearance in American society. Although today 4-H is a large organization with chapters across the nation and beyond, the origin of this club is still a mystery. Even as America's rural population slowly moved toward urban areas, this club spread rapidly across the South and the Midwest. This thesis will investigate why 4-H was born and how it was able to expand so quickly in Iowa in the years from 1900 to 1920. It will address the general anxiety that grew in rural areas (caused by depopulation) and the steps people took to stop the population shift. The thesis will then discuss the birth of 4-H in Iowa's schools, the gradual merging of Iowa State's Extension Service and 4-H school clubs, and final break between Iowa's educational system and the organization. Finally, the thesis will end with a discussion of 4-H's World War One years and 4-H adaptation of rural gender norms. Ultimately, this thesis will argue that 4-H was part of the Progressive Movement and that the club became well accepted by the rural community because it filled a need left by the depopulation of the countryside.

## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time, an old cow got into a garden. Pulling up all the radishes, carrots, corn, and beets, the cow left the diminutive garden with only one meager cucumber. For the nine-year-old boy who had tended the plot, it became a tale of hard luck. After the child complained to his parents, the boy's father acknowledged the problem. The farmer then promised the child that if he continued to maintain a well-kept garden the next year, he would indeed lock up the destructive cow.<sup>1</sup> This childhood tale of woe was not published in a book of children's stories or folktales. Instead, it can be found in a very official government document sent to Washington D.C. in 1920. Why on earth would this story be located in a governmental report? Why would the federal government care about one child's garden in rural Iowa? Ultimately, in order to answer these questions, one must understand the early history of the youth club known as 4-H.<sup>2</sup>

The start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a spike in anxiety about the loss of rural population in America. Politicians, progressive reformers, city and country people alike observed the clear movement away from the countryside with apprehension. This population shift, a trend that had begun long before the turn of the century, became more pronounced than ever before. With so many people leaving the country, Americans began to wonder what would become of rural life, its values and culture. Farmer E.H.

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<sup>1</sup> "Narrative Report for Lee County Iowa: Children Reports," October, 1919, 4, in *Extension Report with Iowa Rural Youth* 1:2, Iowa State Special Collections.

<sup>2</sup> Although this organization is now called 4-H, early records indicate the club was known simply as "Boys and Girls Club." The organization did not adopt the title 4-H until the early 1920s. Due to the level of popularity and acknowledgement of the name "4-H," I will be referring to the club by that name throughout this thesis.

Diehl wrote into *Wallace's Farmer* about population loss, "There seems to be a spirit of unrest, a desire to break away from the routine of farm life and try something else. Thus farming interests suffer for want of sufficient help."<sup>3</sup> Diehl's observation was just one of many, as America struggled to come to terms with its changing environment and identity as a people.

Foremost, this population movement disturbed the cultural mindset of Jeffersonian America. For President Thomas Jefferson, writing in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there was no greater occupation than that of a farmer: "Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bonds."<sup>4</sup> While America had clearly changed since Thomas Jefferson's time, many still believed in his basic principles. For some, including the majority of the rural community, the noble occupation of the small, independent farmer was still the idyllic model by which all other American professions were judged. Many believed that farmers were the strong backbone of the country, and that they held a special place in the national consciousness. Rural workers provided not only food for a growing nation, but independent thought and an ethical compass for the country. Even President Theodore Roosevelt, a quintessential Progressive himself, wrote, "we need the development of men in the open country, who will be in the future, as in the past, the stay and strength of

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<sup>3</sup> E.H. Diehl, "From the Farm," *Wallace's Farmer*, February 24, 1911, 41.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Jefferson, letter to John Jay, August 23, 1785, 1, Lillian Goldman Law Library, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/let32.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/let32.asp), (accessed February 11, 2013).

the nation in time of war, and its guiding and controlling spirit in time of peace.”<sup>5</sup> This is why the population shift was so disconcerting. Why would this trend continue in the face of the seemingly overwhelming moral superiority of the countryside?

Most historians have ignored the importance of depopulation for progressivism in rural America. This lack of awareness has as much to do with the myth of rural America as it does with the elusiveness of these subjects. More than ever before, Americans are disconnected from their rural past. Massive industrialization, population shifts, and the technological revolution of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have permitted us to forget life not one hundred years ago. Moreover, this lack of awareness has also allowed Americans to create a myth of rural America. Instead of understanding the critical interdependence of farming communities, most Americans think only of fierce autonomy when it comes to farmers. Much in the same way that Native Americans are subject to the “Pristine Myth” (a stereotype that claims American Indians had no impact on the environment), rural people are typecast as savage independents, rough-jawed men and sturdy women standing against nature. This myth has flooded our public consciousness, as its presence has invaded everything from our great novels, *O Pioneers* by Willa Cather and *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, to car advertisements. Whether or not this myth reflects some element of reality, the fact remains that it hides the importance of interdependence and kinship. Farmers worked independently but they were also part of a community.

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<sup>5</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, *Introduction to the Report of the Commission on Country Life*, 9, Google Books, <http://www.archive.org/stream/reportofcommissi00unitia#page/n5/mode/2up>, (accessed October 7, 2011).



Some scholars have reached beyond this myth to study the rural community. Rural historians David Danbom and Mary Neth have both completed fascinating works on rural people at this time. However, both have failed to understand the unique role 4-H played in Iowa. For one, both of these historians have fallen short in their assessment of this youth organization. Danbom claims that rural people resisted such organizations, believing them to be urban attempts to control country life. Mary Neth also has a similar argument in her groundbreaking work *Preserving the Family Farm*. She argues that organizations such as 4-H undermined the status of rural women and ultimately introduced an economic system that destabilized rural society. While these two books are important contributions, their assessment of 4-H in Iowa shows their larger conception of the organization is too reductive.

It is during the unrest of the early twentieth century that the organization known as 4-H made an appearance across American society. While 4-H today is a popular organization with groups across the nation, the origin of this club in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is still relatively unknown. In an age when the rural population was slowly draining away towards the cities, this youth club spread rapidly across the Midwest. This thesis seeks to examine the context in which 4-H was born and why it spread so quickly in Iowa in the years from 1900 to 1920. It will also investigate the importance of 4-H in the rural community, and more specifically, the niche it filled in the tumultuous Progressive Era. Finally this thesis will seek to answer whether 4-H was successful in assimilating into rural Iowa. In the end, I will argue that the anxiety caused by rural depopulation allowed 4-H to be widely accepted by the rural community.

The first chapter will explore the context in which 4-H was originally conceived. There was a clear movement away from rural areas to the booming cities at this time (Iowa included). This was a great source of anxiety for many people, both urban and rural, for a multitude of reasons. This chapter will first explain what caused people to leave rural areas, focusing primarily on youth. For most Americans, social isolation, a lack of leisure activities, and inferior educational practices were the main factors that drove children away from rural areas. I will then describe the anxieties this produced for both urban and rural people. Finally, this thesis will scrutinize the variety of responses to the movement and how people tried to stop rural youth from ultimately leaving the farm.

After setting up the context in the first section, the second chapter will survey the ties between early boys and girls clubs, which would later be called 4-H, and the educational system of Iowa. This chapter will start with Jessie Field (widely known as the “mother of 4-H”) and her work in Page County, including her introduction of club work within the school setting, her effort with teachers, and the formation of the first farm camps in 1910 and 1911. By looking at Field’s highly influential work, this chapter will describe the early goals of 4-H and how they were accepted by the larger rural community. The chapter will continue with the growing partnership between 4-H and the Extension Department, and finally end with a discussion of the split between the Iowa Department of Public Instruction and the Extension led 4-H clubs in 1914.

The final and most important chapter of this thesis will scrutinize the growth of 4-H throughout the state and show how 4-H was able to successfully integrate itself into the rural community. More specifically, I argue that 4-H, more than any other rural

progressive movement, filled a niche within the rural community. Its success primarily came from the major events of the time, World War One and the rise of the American welfare state, as well as adaptability of the youth club. In order to prove this argument, I will explore the growth of 4-H throughout the state of Iowa and analyze its contributions at a localized and statewide level until the early 1920s. Furthermore, the response of parents, children and the wider community will also be discussed within this chapter.

Ultimately, the early beginning of 4-H deserves to be studied because it was one of the most successful organizations to come out of the Progressive Era. Although mostly ignored by the larger historical community, rural progressivism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was critically important. While most scholars concentrate on urban advancements, many people still lived and worked in rural settings. It is a large oversight on the part of the historical community to ignore 4-H's rapid growth across the state. Whereas other movements quickly lost traction once entering rural community, 4-H *was* a rural movement. By studying it, historians can gain better insight into rural progressivism, the lives of rural children, and urban and rural relations in a contentious time period.

Even more importantly, 4-H filled a niche within the rural community that was missing before its inception. Faced with the possibility of losing rural youth to the lure of the city, many searched for a way to stem the tide. Not limited by politics, religion, gender, or even educational differences, 4-H provided a center for rural youth activity that was both instructive and fun. It offered a community struggling with population loss and other economic issues a chance to rebuild neighborhood bonds and pride in their

rural lifestyle. Its contribution to rural Iowa, and frankly the rest of the country, deserves to be studied.

## CHAPTER 2

## ANXIETY

*“I see a time when the farmer will not need to live in a lonely cabin on a lonely farm. I see the farmers coming together in groups. I see them with time to read, and time to visit with their fellows. I see them enjoying lectures in beautiful halls, erected in every village. I see them gather like the Saxons of old upon the green at evening to sing and dance. I see cities rising near them with schools, and churches, and concert halls, and theaters. I see a day when the farmer will no longer be a drudge and his wife a bond slave, but happy men and women who will go singing to their pleasant tasks upon their fruitful farms. When the boys and girls will not go west nor to the city; when life will be worth living. In that day the moon will be brighter and the stars more glad, and pleasure and poetry and love of life come back to the man who tills the soil.”<sup>6</sup> — Hamlin Garland*

Hamlin Garland, winner of the Pulitzer Prize, represented a class of people increasingly found in early 20<sup>th</sup> century America. Growing up in a rural family that moved from farm to farm across the Midwest, young Garland eventually fled to the city. Disenchanted with the rural lifestyle, he escaped to become a writer. In many ways, Garland symbolized the crossroads between the Progressive Movement and rural America. One of the most fervent times of reform in America history, the Progressive Movement focused passionate attention on social and political reform as the country stepped out of the chaotic Gilded Age. Ever more discontent with old Victorian values

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<sup>6</sup> Hamlin Garland, *A Spoil of Office: a Story of the Modern West* (New York: Kessinger Publishing, 2007), 12.

and uneasy with the class divide, the budding middle class during the Progressive Era responded by rejecting individualism with the intent of reshaping a more unified society. What resulted was a flowering of political and social change that can still be seen today. However, even the mighty Progressives ultimately fell to internal and external pressure. Punctuated by events like the Red Scare and an increased tension between big business and labor, much of the Progressive Movement finally folded with the political victories of Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and the conclusion of the First World War.<sup>7</sup> However, the movement's collapse did not extend to all of its factions. While newspapers cursed Jane Addams for her pacifist beliefs, other parts of the Progressive Movement continued to grow in number and influence. For example, one rural youth club known as 4-H club developed into a national association. Why did this small rural youth club eventually outstrip its Progressive roots? Why did it flourish and become an enduring organization? In order to answer that question, historians must first answer the question of why 4-H came to be at all.

When looking back on the frenzied age of Progressivism, historians are quick to note the challenges to political corruption, the crusade for the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment, and attempts to reform the cities. Multiple books have even been dedicated to the advent of national parks and the extension of leisure in the daily lives of Americans. And yet, a club still relevant today, one with over 60 million alumni, barely registers for most

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<sup>7</sup> Michael E. McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 3-319.

Progressive era historians.<sup>8</sup> With the rise of urban life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most people, including historians, have lost touch with America's rural past. But the Progressive Movement did not simply pass by the country's farmers. The changes of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century also affected their lives, whether they resisted or embraced these transformations.

For rural people living at the turn of the century, one of the most disconcerting trends in American life was the depopulation of the countryside. Rural depopulation, a term defined as the mass exodus of rural people to urban areas, had been a problem since the early days of the American colonies. But with the "conquering" of the West, cheap yet bountiful land became less plentiful, leading farmers to move towards commercial agriculture. Because of this, rural depopulation slowly developed from a minor worry to a serious issue. From 1880 to 1910, more than eleven million people migrated away from rural areas.<sup>9</sup> Even in Iowa, an overwhelming agricultural state, the rural population had fallen by 15% from 1900 to 1930. By 1920, urban Americans had finally surpassed their rural cousins as a percentage of the population.

Conceptions of environment have clearly changed since the turn of the century, but for most of American history, urban settings offered a unique set of problems. As early as the 1830s, metropolitan areas became associated with deceit, sickness, and a general lack of morality. Youth manuals and guidebooks warned their readers of the

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<sup>8</sup> "Who We Are," 4-H, accessed March 26, 2012, <http://www.4-h.org/about/youth-development-organization>.

<sup>9</sup> Leon F. Litwack and Winthrop D. Jordan, *The United States: Becoming a World Power*, 7th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1991), 499.

hypocrisy and sin that inhabited these areas.<sup>10</sup> While this may have referred to the growing market economy of the time, it also alluded to the general unhealthiness of pre-modern cities. This perceived relationship between urban areas and malevolence continued into the Gilded and Progressive Ages, causing greater anxiety as the West began to close. As historian Alan Trachtenberg wrote in his great work on post-Civil War society, “Within the traditional image of the fallen city lay another image, less of moral condemnation and more fear and anxiety: the image of the city as mystery, as unfathomable darkness.”<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, rural environments have long been connected to vigor and morality. This was especially true as Americans moved further and further West, looking for homesteads that would satisfy both their desire for land and their conception of “health.” Because early Americans connected the robustness of their land to the overall health of their family, rural areas became associated with integrity and righteousness. This extended to one of the nature’s largest professions, farming.<sup>12</sup> Thomas Jefferson himself maintained the virtue of farmers, writing “Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he has a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine.”<sup>13</sup> Farmers (as well as many others) saw themselves as heirs to the Jeffersonian dream and the moral backbone of the country.

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<sup>10</sup> Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 1-123.

<sup>11</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Macmillan Press, 1982), 103.

<sup>12</sup> Conevery Bolton Valencius, *Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves And Their Land* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 10.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Richmond: J.W. Randolph, 1781), 175-176.



This manifested itself in nearly every major agricultural organization, from the Grange and the Populist to the Future Farmers of America. So while the city's commerce and expanding market signaled ethical decay, conceptions of rural healthiness and morality grew stronger.

For many Americans in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the choice between living in the city or staying in the country offered no contest. Rapid urbanization and the problems that went along with it created a repulsive view of city living. The deskilled work of the "wage slaves," filthy city streets, and wicked temptations of city life led to an increasingly grim outlook for many Americans. Whereas many Americans believed that farmers possessed strong character traits, such as independence and diligence, urban workers seemed weak in comparison. Many claimed that they lacked self-reliance, servants to American greed. As problems between big business and labor grew larger such thoughts became more pronounced. Furthermore, while Americans understood that rural environments naturally allowed for the development of strong ethics, city life was filled with temptations. From the point of view of many, rampant alcoholism, prostitution, and other wicked practices filled the urban environment. Increased immigration created housing shortages and diseases often ran uncontrolled through the streets. These drawbacks were enough to cause alarm and distrust as cities became more entrenched throughout the nation.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, as the Progressive Movement gained strength, reformers also began to link the natural environment to ethical character. Kenyon Butterfield, president of the

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<sup>14</sup> William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: Norton Press, 1992), 25-385.

Massachusetts Agricultural College and later member of the Country Life Commission, attested to the moral integrity of country dwellers by stating:

There are in the country few hiding places for vice, and vice usually has enough modesty not to wish to stalk abroad. I do not mean to say that the moral influences of the country are only good; but I do say that, so far as the purity of the family as an institution is concerned, the country mode of living is conducive to a very high standard.<sup>15</sup>

While the city could offer a dizzying array of technological wonders and easy living, many Progressives understood that these wonders fostered decadence instead of virtue. On the other hand, the beauty of nature promoted ethical character. As John Muir, the famous environmentalist of the day, proclaimed, “Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out going to the mountains is going home; that wilderness is a necessity.”<sup>16</sup> Muir would later claim that nature cleansed the soul, presumably of the city’s corruption.<sup>17</sup>

For these reasons, America’s farmers disdained urban living. Although rural citizens gained valuable experiences through their interaction with nature, city folk lacked the backbone of the rural community. As one farmer put it when describing urban dwellers, city folk were not “thrown out on own resources and hence fail to develop

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<sup>15</sup> Kenyon Butterfield, “Rural Life and the Family,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 14, no. 6 (May 1909), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2762547>.

<sup>16</sup> John Muir, *Our National Parks* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1901), 1.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 1-10.

character.”<sup>18</sup> The rural community celebrated its struggle to survive, correlating the agricultural environment and way of life with traits such as independence and diligence. One rural community member even proposed that parents throw their sons out on their own assets: “Why not gave your boy a chance to became a man.”<sup>19</sup> Through the author’s eyes, the struggle to survive was an important feature of rural life and allowed people to develop a strong work ethic. Furthermore, some members of the rural community seemed more than willing to let rural youth flee to the city if they did not develop the traits needed to be a farmer. As an author for *Wallace’s Farmer* maintained, “Some boys should leave if they were not willing to think. A farmer requires intelligence and skilled labor.”<sup>20</sup> The writer later maintained that people who failed to develop these attributes should leave for the simpler and less skilled occupations in the city. By making this kind of assessment, this farmer clearly linked country living with moral and intellectual superiority.

Moreover, according to another farmer’s wife, country people were healthier than their city cousins. Having access to fresh food and country air was a far cry from the stink of city life.<sup>21</sup> Predictably, especially given the state of most cities, many urban citizens shared this view. In a letter written to *Wallace’s Farmer’s* Hearth and Home section, one “city cousin” asked farm girls why they moved to the city. Citing the ill and lonely country girls she saw wandering the streets, this urban dweller openly wondered

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<sup>18</sup> “Farm Boy Problem,” *Wallace’s Farmer*, January 7, 1910, 2.

<sup>19</sup> “Throw the Boys on Their Own Resources,” *Wallace’s Farmer*, October 23, 1903, 2.

<sup>20</sup> “Why Boys Left the Farm,” *Wallace’s Farmer*, October 9, 1903, 4.

<sup>21</sup> “The Farm and the Town,” *Iowa Homestead*, February 23, 1899, 18.

why they would bother leaving the sheltered life of rural America.<sup>22</sup> Unsurprisingly, the writer received no reply, as most country folk were baffled by this problem as well. If the country was such a better place to live, both morally and environmentally, why were young people leaving it?

The answer to this question remained a preoccupation for many rural and urban discussion forums as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries marched on. This fixation became a common theme in popular rural newspapers like *Wallace's Farmer*, the *Iowa Homestead* and even non-agricultural papers. Expressing the united concern over the population movement, these papers posted not just articles written by journalists but also a massive number of letters written by members of the rural community. It was this kind of showing from the average men and women that proved this anxiety to be more than just a passing worry of a few.

These newspapers proved to be critically important to exploring this anxiety, as they gave both urban and rural Iowans a forum to express their opinion why rural youth left the farm for the city. True to form, this complex question led to varied answers. Writers blamed everything from bad Iowa roads and sloth-like mail delivery to problems in rural education and overall agrarian drudgery. One farm boy writing in to *Wallace's Farmer* in 1903 even insisted that so many rural sons departed because of the movement of the farm *girls*. He stated that the best girls left for town to get *polished* and once they experienced urban life they did not want to leave. This forced a dilemma on the boys, as the author pointed out, "If I stay on the farm I cannot marry my equal." Thus, according

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<sup>22</sup> "Why Do Girls Left the Farm," *Wallace's Farmer*, November 29, 1907, 18.

to the author, the easy solution for the community was simply to simply keep these girls on the farm.<sup>23</sup>

Of course, these concerned writers were also quick to tie this problem to other issues within the community, especially rural socialization. In fact, many letters written in to these popular newspapers promptly stated that while rural life was superior to that of a city, the social isolation of the farm encouraged the young to move away. The most cited reason for the population shift was the lack of proper socialization opportunities for rural youth. Multiple letter writers claimed that rural youth saw urban areas as exciting centers for leisure. New advancements in entertainment (including movie theaters, recreational sports, and Vaudeville) were a far cry from the simple and imaginative play of rural children.<sup>24</sup> Whereas farm youth had to navigate between parental desire for work and their yearning to play, city life seemed filled with novel amusements of a new age.

As cities continued to grow, rural parents became more and more concerned about the over-glamorized image of these urban environments. While the young might enjoy the city's theaters and dance halls, they would also become acquainted with the seedier aspects of the urban underbelly. Parents feared prostitution, illicit substances, crime and other pitfalls would quickly corrupt their children. Although most rural parents had little problem with amusements within the confines of the community, they worried about the unknown and suspected that unscrupulous (and unchaperoned) leisure of the city would lead to ruin. Older rural community members therefore felt compelled

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<sup>23</sup> "Why the Boy Leaves the Farm," *Wallace's Farmer*, October 23, 1903, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, *Childhood on the Farm: Work, Play, and Coming of Age in the Midwest* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2005), 127-157.

to combat a romanticized version of the city in order to stem the tide of sons and daughters leaving the farm. This seemed an impossible feat to many. One writer even lamented that there was no point in warning the youth of this reality, as they would seek the city anyway due to the lack of a satisfying social life in the country.<sup>25</sup>

However, it was not just the rural community that feared the city. Many living in crowded areas also attested to the amorality of city living. Two of the most famous urban reformers, Hull House's Jane Addams and photographer Jacob Riis held similar views of urban problems. In his well-known book *How The Other Half Lives*, Riis remarked that New York slums, "bore the mark of Cain," invoking a religious fervor against city living.<sup>26</sup> Addams too described life in a city as morally bankrupt and needing to be reformed, "Let us know the modern city in its weakness and wickedness, and then seek to rectify and purify it until it shall be free at least from the grosser temptations which now beset the young people who are living in its tenement houses and working in its factories."<sup>27</sup> The writers' messages were clear examples of the zeal reformers felt as they fought against the perceived immorality of urban existence. However, the gravity of these concerns seemed wasted on rural youth as they still left in droves.

In order to combat the allure of the city, many proposed that the rural community needed to create more social opportunities. Lack of appropriate social outings was clearly a big concern for the people writing into these newspapers. Most of the writers

<sup>25</sup> "Untitled," *Wallace's Farmer*, January 28, 1910, 6.

<sup>26</sup> Jacob Riis, *How The Other Half Lives* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890), 7 as found online at <http://www.bartleby.com/208/>. Accessed November 29, 2011

<sup>27</sup> Jane Addams, *The Spirit of the Youth and the City Streets* (Norwood: Norwood Press, 1909), 14 as found online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16221/16221-h/16221-h.htm>. Accessed November 29, 2011.

maintained the belief in rural superiority, but also acknowledged that life on the farm could be monotonous. These letter writers offered multiple proposals to improve rural social life in order to keep people from leaving. One farmer (clearly not a teacher) suggested there “must be social center in each neighborhood,” because the rural schools were not providing the necessary socialization and entertainment .<sup>28</sup> Another article, properly titled “Rural Amusements,” advocated making country life more leisurely for farm children. The author insisted that rural youth were going to the town for fun, so why not create amusements in the country to keep them there? He began to paint a picture of rural merry-making, one in which clubs for football and baseball played a key role in occupying farm youth.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, this writer’s very suggestion betrayed him as an urban dweller rather than a rural worker. While his proposition to improve rural social life was a view held by many in the rural community, this writer failed to take into account the economic importance of rural children to family farms. Unlike the children of the emerging urban middle class, farm youth lacked the freedom money to spend a large amount of time away from their duties at home. They were too financially important to their family’s livelihood.<sup>30</sup>

However, concern over rural children continued to receive the attention of urban reformers. Although rural children did not receive the same level of interest that urban youth did, many still worried about their wellbeing. One reformer in particular believed that the reason why so many left the farm (as well as a slew of other issues) was due to

<sup>28</sup> “The Socialization of Country Life,” *Wallace’s Farmer*, January 7, 1910, 2.

<sup>29</sup> “Rural Amusements,” *Wallace’s Farmer*, July 28, 1911, 2.

<sup>30</sup> Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, *Childhood on the Farm*, (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2005), 1-35 and 185-197.

what she called a farm *girl* problem. Publishing her book *America Country Girl* in 1915, writer Martha Foote Crow noted the mass of research done on the farmer, his wife, and his son and then asked “where is the Country Girl and what is happening in her department.”<sup>31</sup> For Crow, the lack of attention paid to rural girls was especially disconcerting given the distinct movement from country to city. Happiness, she proposed, was the greatest method of keeping these girls in the countryside. To ensure this, different considerations needed to be taken into account. Foote mentioned that greater preparation for farm life, better social opportunities (such as music and theatrical productions) and even parental allowances should be given to these girls. This would allow for greater happiness and thus more young women would be willing to stay in the country.

On the other hand, rural writers proposed more practical suggestions to help improve rural socialization. One farmer’s wife even scolded *Wallace’s Farmer* for employing city-living journalists to give advice to rural people. She stated that the urban dwellers did not truly understand the lifestyle of the rural community. She then affirmed that the letters written by rural citizens were a much better help to her. Like other writers, this farmer’s wife offered a couple of sensible ideas for an improved rural social life. These included using the winter months to do the majority of socializing and going out at least once a week to break up farm monotony.<sup>32</sup> Other people who wrote into the farm newspapers also echoed this writer’s ideas. As a way to create a more social rural

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<sup>31</sup> Marta Foote Crow, *The American Country Girl* (New York: Fredrick A. Stokes Company, 1915), 4.

<sup>32</sup> Country Woman, “Social Life on the Farm,” *Wallace’s Farmer*, February 11, 1910, 23.



community, writers presented spelling schools, debate teams, and other clubs as opportunities for rural youth.<sup>33</sup>

Beyond the realm of socialization, many of the people who wrote in to these newspapers asserted that weak rural education, not just the lack of social opportunities, was also to blame for the movement to the city. As one article in *Wallace's Farmer* put it, "They [the young] have been educated away from the soil."<sup>34</sup> Many complained that schools influenced farm youth against country living. They implied that most teachers knew little about what it took to be a successful farmer. Some of these same writers also stressed their suspicion of rural teachers and the possible impact they could have on impressionable students. Even one city-trained educator could easily drive youth away from their rural community with stories of the glamorous urban lifestyle. One schoolmarm wrote in warning families to make sure they understood who their children's teachers were and what they taught in the schools.<sup>35</sup> She voiced a common suspicion of the rural community. While schools performed important social tasks, they also gave teachers a great deal of influence over rural youth. If these teachers were from the city, they might give more fodder to the already tempting view of the urban areas. Of course, many more sensible letter writers openly dismissed the likelihood of this teacher conspiracy, probably because most rural teachers were farm children themselves.

The real concern, however, was that rural education did not prepare rural children for farming in the future. Instead of focusing on improvement in farm

<sup>33</sup> "Lack of Sociability Among Farmer," *Wallace's Farmer*, February 24, 1911, 3.

<sup>34</sup> E.H. Diehl, "From the Farm," *Wallace's Farmer*, February 24, 1911, 41.

<sup>35</sup> "What the Schoolma'am Thinks," *Wallace's Farmer*, December 22, 1911, 26.

techniques or examining new practices, rural schools concentrated too much on traditional education that had little practicality in a successful rural life. According to one rural citizen who wrote into the *Iowa Homestead*, while “book’larnin” might be considered accepted education, a farm boy learned habits of success from the home, not the classroom.<sup>36</sup> By focusing on education that did not prepare youth for a future on a farm, schooling shifted interest away from agriculture. Therefore, schools became a conduit for rural children to lose interest in farm life and one of the major causes of the exodus from the country.

However, even if a rural teacher wanted to teach agriculture, these academic settings had neither the resources, nor trained instructors to do so. While many urban schools had made advances in the educational and sanitary needs of their students, most rural Iowans still attended inadequately ventilated one-room schoolhouses. Moreover, the teachers paid to educate them were most often young and poorly-educated themselves. While the rural community did have some institutions set up to discuss agriculture and explore new techniques, those were mostly for adult males not children. For example, farmers’ institutes, though criticized by some for their lack of success, did allow adult farmers a chance to access new information.<sup>37</sup>

Many of the letter writers also discussed the importance of urging rural youth to love the farm. Farm labor has always been an intensely physical occupation, with rural youth playing an important economic role. Rural children were a lucrative commodity

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<sup>36</sup> “The Farm as an Educator,” *Iowa Homestead*, January 30, 1891, 2.

<sup>37</sup> David B. Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution*. (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1979) 70-71.

for the family farm, with boys helping their father in fields and the girls working with their mothers to maintain the household. Toil for these children was a never-ending process, as there were always chores to be done. It was because of the physical nature of farm work and its constant demands throughout a child's life that many considered farm work relentless drudgery. One farm boy wrote into *Wallace's Farmer* bemoaning the unpleasantness of the repetitive nature of farming work, especially corn husking.<sup>38</sup> Seeking to combat both the image of a dull and harsh lifestyle, many writers sought a way to attract rural youth to back to the farm. Some advocated making agriculture the work of both the mind as well as the body.

By adding more scientific reasoning and academic study to the field of agriculture, these reformers hoped to interest the rural youth in staying on the farm. Many of the letters written in to farm newspapers stressed this sentiment. They uttered approval of rural education at agricultural colleges, as land-grant colleges would both improve farming techniques and create more social opportunities for the restless youth. These reformers hoped by allowing farm youth to examine their chores in a scientific context, they would be able to turn boring farm duties into a fascinating experiments. This would of course lead to more youth deciding to remain in the country rather than move to the city.<sup>39</sup>

Overall, the root of rural anxiety over the population shift was a deeply seated fear of an unknown future. A changing American landscape, one in which urban industry

<sup>38</sup> F.R.Y., "Why Boys Left the Farm," *Wallace's Farmer*, October 2, 1903, 15.

<sup>39</sup> Audrey Shoemaker, "The beginnings of agricultural education in Midwestern rural schools, 1895-1915" (Master's Thesis, Iowa State University, 2010), 25-35.

dominated, pushed many rural residents toward this apprehension. Most farmers felt the pressure of the shifting American economy. While farmers had long been anti-big business and wary of the powerful railroads, they could still find comfort in the fact that they possessed a noble lifestyle. But with the clear passage of rural youth away from the country, many could no longer cling to this assumed advantage. Simply put, rural youth leaving not only separated families but also created greater concern over the loss of rural traditions. How would the dignified customs of the rural way of life continue if its future chose not to pursue it? Who would feed the nation and maintain the Jeffersonian ideal? It was this problem that fueled the search for an answer.

In addition, while rural community members were undoubtedly anxious about the population shift away from the country, some urban citizens were also apprehensive about this phenomenon. Their anxiety had as much to do with their view of rural life as it did with the actual population movement. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century marched on, Progressive reformers became increasingly concerned about the character of the nation's population. As previously stated, many urban dwellers believed that the country was healthier than the city. However, as the more came to call urban environments their home, reformers worried that Americans were losing their mental and physical toughness. The most famous Progressive of them all, Theodore Roosevelt, often noted, "The things that will destroy America are prosperity-at-any-price, peace-at-any-price, safety-first instead of duty-first, the love of soft living, and the get-rich-quick theory of life."<sup>40</sup> For Roosevelt

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<sup>40</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, letter to S. Stanwood Menken, 1917, 10-11, Theodore Roosevelt Center, <http://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Research/Digital-Library/Record.aspx?libID=o280589>, (Accessed January 30, 2013).

and others like him, rural Americans' proximity to nature created a better ethical character.

Furthermore, while the nation sought to readjust to a migrating population, rising food prices also caused a stir. As the twentieth century progressed, the cost of food and other basic needs rose. This created a need for a higher living wage for the average person, creating more economic problems for the nation.<sup>41</sup> Blaming this growing inflation on inefficient agricultural production, Americans looked upon the rural-to-urban migration with increasing worry. In some manner, they were justified in their anxiety. Even within the "golden age of agriculture," farm productivity improved a meager one percent from 1900 to 1920. Moreover, while the population of America grew forty percent, agricultural production increased only thirty percent. With food demand at an all time high, food prices increasingly rose, leading to a more disgruntled urban public. Politicians, urban reformers, and others began to worry and speculate about what rising food costs could mean for the country. Concerned that the price increase could have a serious effect on American lifestyle and world trade, these reformers sought a solution to the "farmer boy problem."<sup>42</sup>

However, before direct involvement of the federal government in this matter, other reformers (both rural and urban) sought a way to increase agriculture's effectiveness and slow the population shift. One of the most popular schemes to solve the problems was to hold more agricultural contests for rural youth. As one writer put it

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<sup>41</sup> A living wage is necessary daily income of a person in order to meet basic human needs, including food, shelter, clothing, etc.

<sup>42</sup> David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 163-167.

when proposing a contest, “when wisely conducted comes a new interest in the work of the school which was vitalized by close contact with the farm and the home; a growing realization and appreciation, on the part of both teacher and pupil of the opportunities and advantages of life on the farm.”<sup>43</sup> Often sponsored by the local farmers’ institute, these contests aimed to lure rural youth back to the farm through cash and prizes.

While these types of contests had been popular throughout the Midwest for some time (the first Iowa corn contest was in 1857), these events increased both their number and scope as rural depopulation continued. Although cash was the main prize of most early contests, scholarships to local agricultural schools soon became the main form of reward. For example, one Illinois county offered an all-expenses paid, two-week agricultural course for the winner of an alfalfa study contest.<sup>44</sup> This shift from money to scholarships showcased a deliberate move by the rural community to embrace the importance of agricultural education. Many felt that if the rural community was going to stop youth from leaving the country, it was going to be through the lure of education. Even farm girls, largely ignored by the media of the day, were soon the target of canning, sewing, baking, gardening, and poultry raising contests.<sup>45</sup> Rural newspapers dedicated a lot of space to these contests, especially the promotion of prizes and the expected refinements in work habits. These events were so popular that early 4-H groups would later adopt them as a critical part of their educational program.

<sup>43</sup> W.C. Latta, “Young People’s Contest,” *Wallace’s Farmer*, June 23, 1911, 16.

<sup>44</sup> “County Farmers’ Institutes,” *Prairie Farmer*, November 7, 1907, 13.

<sup>45</sup> “Contest for Ohio Girls,” *Ohio Farmer*, April 3, 1913, 23.

Although rural contests provided a means of combating depopulation, it nevertheless failed to stem the population flow. As the population shift became even more pronounced, anxiety climaxed in the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt. Taking on the progressive nature of its president, the American government sought answers to the many issues of the time period, including that of the population movement away from the country. In order to address these concerns, Roosevelt put together a mixed group of academics, urban reformers, and rural ambassadors. Seeking a solution to the perceived problems in rural life, the Country Life Commission started work in 1908. Travelling throughout the nation and distributing thousands questionnaires, the commission eventually published its findings in 1911.<sup>46</sup>

This desire to reform rural America eventually led to the inception of the Country Life Movement. Originating with urban concerns over food production and the rise of urbanization, these Progressive reformers searched for a solution to America's population shift and consequent food problem. They targeted several areas that needed improvement in rural America, including the need for better education and more socialization opportunities. With these essentials addressed, reformers hypothesized that more children would stay on the farm, leading to better agricultural production and thus lower food prices.<sup>47</sup>

Roosevelt himself wrote in the introduction of this report, stating, "The problems of farm life had received very little consideration and the result has been bad for those

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<sup>46</sup> "Liberty Hyde Bailey: A Man for All Seasons," Cornell University Library Exhibit, 2004, <http://rnc.library.cornell.edu/bailey/commission/index.html>.

<sup>47</sup> David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 168-171.

who dwell in the open country, and therefore bad for the whole nation.”<sup>48</sup> Pointing out the important role farmers played in the founding of the nation, Roosevelt opened the commission with a promise to improve rural life. Staffed with people such as Liberty Hyde Bailey, a famous horticulturist and agricultural enthusiast from Cornell University, and the rural newspaper giant Henry Wallace, this commission focused on the assumed deficiencies of country life and how to overcome them.

Prompted by other progressive reforms of the time, the Country Life Commission based its solutions in science and reorganization. It sought to replace the stubborn traditions of farming with new scientific advancements, revealing the desire for cheaper food prices. Furthermore, it recommended that the best way to incorporate these reforms within the rural community was through governmentally funded organizations. As the commission stated, “All the organizations standing for rural progress should be federated, in states and nation.”<sup>49</sup> Through the use of these organizations, reformers believed they would be able to reach the farmers at a local community level. Encouraging cooperation, these organizations would be able to educate the farmers in new agricultural techniques while simultaneously giving the nation a more efficient and bountiful food supply.

Whether or not these urban reformers of rural life actually sought to change the rural community for the betterment of the people living there or for their own economic needs is still debated by historians. Some, such as David Danbom, believed that while

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<sup>48</sup> *Report of the Commission on Country Life* (New York: Sturgis & Walton Company, 1911), accessed October 7, 2011, <http://www.archive.org/stream/reportofcommissi00unitia#page/n5/mode/2up>, 9-10.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 24.



urban reformers might not have understood the rural community, they were still well intended in their pursuit.<sup>50</sup> Other, such as Mary Neth, firmly disagreed with the notion of urban altruism in restructuring the countryside. Neth claimed the urban reformers ignored the wants of the rural community, “This urban ideal glossed over the idea that town and country interests might not be identical or even compatible.”<sup>51</sup> For Neth, the desire to continue the economic domination of the rural community was the real reason for these reforms, not the wish to improve the farmer’s life.<sup>52</sup> Many members of the rural community in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century also seemed to share Neth’s distrust of this urban interest in agrarian life. One farmer wrote into *Wallace’s Farmer* intent on revealing the reality of farming. Calling his article “Farm Fairy Tales,” the writer explicitly scolded urbanites for their lack of knowledge and warned them not to listen to the members of the media or the back-to-the-land movement.<sup>53</sup> Even Henry Wallace, one of the people seeking to reform the countryside, shared this sentiment.

Wallace offered an interesting position within this progressive movement, as he stood with his feet in both the urban and rural worlds. Born and raised on a farm in Pennsylvania, Wallace wrote for the *Iowa Homestead* before creating the popular farm newspaper *Wallace’s Farmer*. While Wallace continued to live and work in urban Des Moines, he celebrated the role of the farmer in American society and the continuation of rural values and traditions. Although no doubt influenced by urban progressive

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<sup>50</sup> David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 161-184.

<sup>51</sup> Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1995), 123.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid 123-136.

<sup>53</sup> “Farm Fairy Tales,” *Wallace’s Farmer*, December 22, 1911, 6.

movements, Wallace also seemed to hold the rural community's interest at heart. In fact, he appeared to share the same rural mistrust of city interests that many farmers held.<sup>54</sup> Writing an article in *Wallace's Farmer* about the educational needs of farm children, Wallace expressed his understanding of why urban workers looked to improve farm education, "Every city consumer will agree that the farmer must be educated, not so much because he wants to help the farmer, but in the hope that educated farmers may mean cheaper farm products"<sup>55</sup> Wallace then criticized the banks and powerful companies for looking to profit from more efficient farmers, showcasing his rural leanings.

In order to stave off rising cost of food prices, the Country Life Commission looked to increase efficiency among the farmers and halt the movement of rural youths to the city. By understanding the urban view of farm life, it is possible to grasp why these reformers took the actions that they did. Urban dwellers saw farm life as drudgery and believed it lacked socialization opportunities for the young. If urban reformers were going to find a way to keep rural children from leaving the farm, most thought socialization efforts might help them succeed. Additionally, because most of the urban reformers recognized that the most important goal of rural reform was to increase farm efficiency, bringing the correct form of education to the rural community was also

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<sup>54</sup> John Fry, "Good Farming, Clear Thinking, Right Living": Midwestern Farm Newspapers, Social Reform, and Rural Readers in the Early Twentieth Century" *Agricultural History* 78, 1 (Winter, 2004), 34-49.

<sup>55</sup> Henry Wallace, "Education for the Farm Boy," 1910, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth* 1:1, Iowa State University Special Collections, 1-8.

critical. Though perhaps misguided by their urban view of rural life, these reformers set out to solve the problems of the countryside.

In the end, the roots of 4-H can be seen in rural depopulation and the anxiety that followed. Even as Americans continued to assert the moral supremacy of the countryside, many could no longer ignore the problems of the country. By identifying failures in socialization and schooling, worried citizens could potentially stop the migrating populace. But their reasons for doing so were not always uniform. Many rural people looked to save their traditions and lifestyle (as well as moral superiority), while some urban reformers yearned for lower food prices. This desire for reform eventually gave rise to both greater educational contests and the Country Life Movement. Ultimately, this Progressive idea would help set the stage for Agricultural Extension and 4-H.

## CHAPTER 3

### EDUCATIONAL ERA

With membership at 6.5 million people and counting, 4-H is considered the largest youth development organization in operation today. Alive in every state, with chapters across urban, suburban, and rural settings, this club currently emphasizes community development, hands-on learning, and healthy living.<sup>56</sup> But this organization was not always so substantial or self-sufficient. In fact, while 4-H would eventually become an independent institution, originally the club was closely tied to the educational system, especially within the state of Iowa. With its focus on agriculture and other rural enterprises, early 4-H clubs fit perfectly within rural Iowa schools and were readily accepted by the community. However, it would not even be ten years before the ties between the Iowa school system and the rapidly expanding club would be broken. Enigmatically in 1914, the Iowa Department of Education would move to discontinue the Iowa State Extension's work with rural teachers, essentially cutting the connection between these rural clubs and the schools that hosted them. This ultimately put the club on a new path, leading its members to create an independent organization within the rural community.

By examining the inception and growth of the club between the years of 1900 and 1914, this chapter will explore the links between the educational system in Iowa and the early organization. Known as the "Educational Era," this chapter will start with educational contests, Capt E. Miller's work, and Jessie Field's efforts in Page County,

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<sup>56</sup> "Who We Are," 4-H, accessed March 26, 2012, <http://www.4-h.org/about/youth-development-organization>,

including her introduction of club work within the school setting, her efforts with teachers, and the formation of the first farm camps in 1910 and 1911. By doing so, this chapter will also gauge the early goals of 4-H and how the rural community accepted the club and its objectives. The chapter will continue with the growing partnership between 4-H and Iowa State's Extension Department, and finally end with the 1914 split between the Iowa Department of Public Institution and the Extension led 4-H clubs.

Ultimately, this chapter will argue that while the rural community rejected other attempts at reform, it readily accepted 4-H for a multitude of reasons. For one, 4-H solely focused on children and was less radical than other reforms. Furthermore, 4-H filled both an educational and social need within the rural community. Essentially, the goals of 4-H interconnected well with the larger worries of the rural community within Iowa. Finally, this chapter will conclude with the contention that the growing battle over school consolidation and the struggle between the state and county superintendents would lead to a break between the club and the Iowa educational system.

Although 4-H's roots within the Iowa educational system are vague, they can be traced back to Iowa State College's Extension Department. Starting in the early twentieth century, this college department looked to spread practical agricultural knowledge to the many farms throughout Iowa. It also sponsored short winter educational courses for youth and sent out its faculty to speak on the topics of livestock and agriculture. One of these professors was Perry G. Holden, a Michigan-educated corn expert. A strong believer in distributing sensible farming knowledge, Holden became a prominent part of Iowa's corn culture. His renowned comprehension of agriculture allowed him to become

a trusted member of the rural community, as another Extension agent described “He carried the torch of better farming and better farm life high and he never failed to light the same torch for others who had a chance to know his.”<sup>57</sup> Holden and other members of the Iowa State Extension (like Paul Taff and Ralph Bliss) would go on to offer their expertise to the growing club, leading to greater rural acceptance.

Along with the Extension Department, early educational contests also played a role in the formation of 4-H. Starting as early as 1857, these contests focused mostly on corn growing and judging, with animal and pantry (contests aimed to increase the homemaking skills of farm girls) contests coming later. While these rural competitions were open to all ages, the contest’s organizers especially encouraged rural youth to enter.<sup>58</sup> One of the most noteworthy facts about these educational contests was that prominent businesses, newspapers, and state colleges sponsored them rather than local organizations. Although local Farmers’ Institutes did regional advertising and often hosted the events, Iowa companies and higher education institutes were the major drivers behind the competitions. The rural newspaper *Wallace’s Farmer* often performed the important task of marketing contests.<sup>59</sup> Given the popularity of the newspaper around the state and the rural background of most of the paper’s readers, it can be assumed that *Wallace’s Farmer* played a critical role in attracting contestants (especially given the

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<sup>57</sup> Editor R.K. Bliss, “Summary of Work with Farm Boys and Girls,” July 1, 1906-July 1, 1914, 1, *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth 1:1*, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>58</sup> George E. Farrell, “Early history of the Club movement,” 1926, 3-4, *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth 1:1*, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>59</sup> Paul C. Taff, “A Brief History of the Origin and Development of the 4-H Clubs in Iowa,” April 1961, 2, *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth 1:1*, Iowa State University Special Collections.

poor state of Iowa's communication channels). Large corporations also supported these rural contests. For example, the Burg Wagon Company of Burlington, Iowa sponsored one open contest (all ages accepted) for the best seed corn. The grand prize for the winner was a high-quality nickel-plated wagon.<sup>60</sup> Both railroads and large banks (traditionally the reviled enemy of small farmer) also funded numerous contests. The Iowa State Bank openly backed one competition set in New London on October 12, 1912. The financial institution offered over one hundred dollars in prizes to the winners of several different contests, including competitions dealing with corn, colts, and pantry stores.<sup>61</sup>

As to why these companies looked to sponsor these competitions in the first place, their motivations probably leaned towards less altruistic reasons than that of the Iowa State Extension Service. While education was the main impetus for this College branch, financial gain was still the major motivator for these businesses. By sponsoring these contests, companies received positive advertising and a proverbial "leg-up" on the competition. Especially given the extensive nature of agriculture as an industry within Iowa, it made financial sense to court farmers.

However, while early educational contests certainly opened the door for the 4-H presence in Iowa, it was the advent of school-based agricultural clubs that provided the first clear origin of this organization. One of the very first of these clubs started with Captain E. Miller of Keokuk County. Elected county superintendent of schools in 1902,

<sup>60</sup> M.L. Mosher, personal letter, September 4, 1972, 1, Paul Taff Papers box 2, file 5 Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>61</sup> "Contest sponsored by Iowa State Bank," October 12, 1912, 1, Paul Taff Papers box 2, file 7, Iowa State University Special Collections.

Miller brought a new outlook to the district's educational system. Starting soon after his election, Miller sent the all the teachers within his district a letter, notifying them that "an educational rally would be held in each township on December 5, 1903."<sup>62</sup> What happened at these educational rallies is unknown, but given Miller's connection to Extension's Professor Holden, one of the major themes was probably agricultural education. This aim was particularly controversial throughout Iowa's rural communities. Many community members believed that agricultural education should be left to the child's parents, rather than a teacher who probably knew little about actual farming. One particularly disgruntled farmer wrote in to the *Iowa Homestead* arguing that schoolwork had little real world application to agriculture. Many assumed that farm children learned success from their parents, not the classroom.<sup>63</sup> In spite of this, Keokuk County elected Captain Miller on three separate occasions, with Miller serving until 1909.<sup>64</sup> While many had sought to reform traditional rural education, Miller actually achieved some major reforms within his district.

Beyond his inclusion of agriculture with local education, Miller's tenure as county superintendent also marked the inception of the first agricultural boys' and girls' clubs within an Iowa school setting. Like other rural institutions, Miller's clubs also used farm contests to attract local students to this new organization. In addition to these basic competitions, Miller utilized the school as a base of operations. From the school setting,

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<sup>62</sup> Ralph K. Bliss, "Early Work with Farm Boys and Girls," no date, 1, Paul Taff Papers box 1, file 6A, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>63</sup> "The Farm as an Educator," *Iowa Homestead*, January 30, 1891, 2.

<sup>64</sup> Maurice W. Soult, Interdepartmental letter to R.K. Bliss, January 3, 1958, 1, Paul Taff Papers box 1, file 12, Iowa State University Special Collections.



these early agricultural clubs held farm-based school fairs where students could show off various projects to the community. These clubs also offered field trips to showcase different successful local farms. Miller himself even remembered taking numerous students to a regional fish hatchery.<sup>65</sup> Teachers could lead multiple boys and girls clubs, dispensing practical information without infringing on parental authority. Simply put, because the students were already at school, these clubs did not entirely interfere with the children's chore schedule at home. Thus, the rural parents accepted the time and energy spent on these clubs more readily.

Another reason why district parents may have been so accepting of Captain Miller's student organizations was because of their connection to the Iowa State Extension department. As ready mentioned, many Extension workers would later have an important role in the larger formation of the club. But Extension would also play a part in the creation of Miller's agricultural clubs. Captain Miller specifically mentioned the great encouragement he received from Professor Perry G. Holden. Along with field trips to multiple local farms, Keokuk County school clubs also offered a chance to visit the agricultural college at Ames. As Miller remembered in 1944, "We ran railroad excursions to Iowa State College where the children and their parents had a chance to become acquainted with the practical farm possibilities at that great institution."<sup>66</sup> By including the parents within the club, Miller again allowed for a greater acceptance of this organization throughout the district.

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<sup>65</sup> Cap E Miller, personal letter to M.L. Wilson, October 11, 1944, 1, Paul Taff Papers, box 1, file 12, Iowa State Special Collections.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 2.

However, it is important to distinguish one of the major differences between Miller's school clubs and the other rural associations of the time. Whereas other rural institutes offered children a chance to participate in their organizations, Captain Miller's clubs were some of the first to solely focus on children. Parents certainly played a key role within his clubs, but mostly because they could offer financial, material, and psychological support. This sole focus on children, rather than adults, brought a certain kind of fulfillment to the children. One man, reminiscing about his time with Captain Miller's clubs, recalled that the students felt, "Now they became leaders, studying, suggesting and practicing that which they had faith would be fruitful."<sup>67</sup> Especially considering the amount of work these rural children experienced in their daily lives, to be the center of attention must have been a heady experience.

Furthermore, outside of youth acceptance of Miller's school clubs, parents and other community leaders were also more likely to support these organizations because of their implications for the rural community. Faced with the possibility of losing even more youth to the growing urban areas, Miller's educational program seemed like a potential solution. In fact, one former member even compared Miller's work to the Biblical figure Moses.<sup>68</sup> This same commentator would also maintain that Miller, "promoted a program calculated to alleviate the situation by means of education. His program was not for youth alone, but for their elders as well."<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Don W Walker, personal letter to Paul Taff, June 8, 1954, 5, Paul Taff Papers box 1, file 12, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 5.

One of the reasons why people believed that Miller's organization could stem the tide of rural youth fleeing the countryside was due to its concentration on farm work as a scientific and technically skilled occupation. One of the major complaints that many people had about living in rural areas was the boring and repetitive work it took to maintain the homestead. One farm boy wrote into *Wallace's Farmer* bemoaning the unpleasantness of the repetitive nature of farm work (especially corn husking).<sup>70</sup> Another former member of the rural community also maintained a similar stance, asserting that most rural children were not willing to take on the drudgery it took to keep a farm and wanted more luxuries and social contact. This is why so many rural children left, as one letter writer noted, "there was a noticeable increase in the numbers of farm youth, who, after completing the course of study in the rural school, completed HS and college, and then engaged in some profession or business wholly foreign to agriculture."<sup>71</sup> But Miller's boys' and girls' clubs directly combated this, showcasing that farm work could be a scientific occupation requiring both brawn and brains. As that same farm boy would say about Miller's school club, "Youth, for the first time felt a real interest and pride in their work."<sup>72</sup>

But while Captain Miller of Keokuk County might be the first example of a leader of school-based agricultural clubs in Iowa, Jessie Field of Page County was probably the most influential superintendent in this era. Known today as the "mother of

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<sup>70</sup> "Why Boys Leave the Farm," *Wallace's Farmer*, October 23, 1903, 15.

<sup>71</sup> Don W Walker, personal letter, June 8, 1954, 4, Paul Taff Papers, box 1, file 12 Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

4-H,” Field’s efforts within Page County are one of the main reasons why the agricultural club was able to flourish throughout Iowa.

Born in Page County, Field’s parents were well-respected members of the community. Her father was one of the first pioneers to settle in the county and both of her parents were trained teachers. This fact would have a large impact on Field’s early life, as both parents felt it vital to push education for not only their sons, but their daughters too. As such, Jessie often accompanied her father to the local farmer’s institutes to listen to lectures and watch demonstrations. This was unusual, given that many of these lectures were specifically designed around corn, a traditionally male facet of rural life.<sup>73</sup> But Field’s father maintained that all education should be open to women, so Field continued to visit the institute until she sought to further her own education.

After gaining her teaching degree and working in Wisconsin for a few years, Field returned to Page County to run for county superintendent. She became the first woman in Iowa ever elected to that position. Inspired by her early education and prominent rural leaders like Henry Wallace (owner and editor of *Wallace’s Farmer*) and Liberty Hyde Bailey (a famous horticulturist and agricultural enthusiast), Field wasted little time pushing for reforms to her county schools. Field herself had used Bailey’s work in teaching nature study to her students and looked for her county teachers to do the same. In 1907, she set out to create the Page County Progressives, an education

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<sup>73</sup> Corn agriculture was traditionally considered a male-dominated aspect of farming, mostly because it was based in fieldwork. Corn clubs (for both adults and children) were also exclusively geared towards males, even in 4-H. Whereas other tasks, like potato growing and animal welfare had less gender distinction, corn remained a male-driven activity.

association that helped teachers learn new techniques and encourage agricultural education within a school setting.<sup>74</sup> These teacher associations would later play an important role in the formation of boys' and girls' agricultural clubs.

Because of these reforms, Page County soon caught the attention of the wider educational community, including educators outside of the state of Iowa. Field's work especially impressed Boston Professor A. W. Winship, chief editor of the Journal of Education. Looking to confirm his endorsement of Field's work, he visited the county in 1909.<sup>75</sup> Clearly, the visit made quite an impression on this professor of education. Like many people in this time period, Winship seemed especially concerned with rural depopulation. But Field's work within Page County gave the professor hope, as he wrote for the New York Times:

Out in the State of Iowa, where the flower of the Nation's great farming land lies, they have found a way to check the tide, which, ever since the days of the Civil War, has been carrying the farmers' boys away from the soil and into cities and towns, there to grow up among the marts of trade far removed from the fields their forefathers tilled.<sup>76</sup>

The key, Winship would write, was the focus on boys' and girls' clubs: "Perhaps the keynote of this rivalry (leading to success) among the farmer lads of Iowa is to be found

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<sup>74</sup> Janice Nahra Friedal, "Jessie Field," *The Palimpsest*, 62:4 (July/August 1981): 104 in Jessie Field Papers box 1, file 9, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>75</sup> The Iowa Writers Program, "The Best Rural Schools in America from Page County History," 1979, 81-82, Jessie Field Papers box 1, file 13, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>76</sup> "Page County Schools," *New York Times* (June 9, 1910): 83-84, in the Jessie Field Papers box 1, file 13, Iowa State University Special Collections.

in the boys' agricultural clubs which had been founded there in recent years."<sup>77</sup>

Exhilarated by this Iowa school district, he encouraged fifteen school superintendents from the South to also tour the county later that year.<sup>78</sup>

The major reason why Jessie Field and Page County received so much attention was largely because of the success of her rural boys' and girls' clubs. Not long after the county elected Field to the position of superintendent, she made it a priority to establish these student organizations. By 1908, Field had launched a Boys Corn Club and Girls Home Club in 130 of her schools.<sup>79</sup> In order to help these school organizations flourish, teachers encouraged students to join in club projects outside of the school setting. As one early member recalled, one club project called on the students to test different corn types within a tin can. Lacking the necessary can for the scheme, the member asked his father for help. Rather than rebuffing his son, the farmer actively sought to acquire the container, even leaving the farmstead to ask neighbors.<sup>80</sup> This narrative shows how entrenched these clubs had become in the local community. Instead of 4-H just involving students in a classroom, its projects often required help from family members. Moreover, instead of parents spurning this new school organization, they participated in it by encouraging and assisting their children. This is just one example of adults actively aiding their children in their club work.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 83-84.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 81-82.

<sup>79</sup> Janice Nahra Friedal, "Jessie Field," *The Palimpsest*, 62:4 (July/August 1981): 104-105, Jessie Field Papers box 1, file 9, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>80</sup> B.L. Hagglund, "Experiences of Early 4-H: Observations from 40 Years Later," November 6, 1948, Collected by R.K. Bliss, 2, Jessie Field Papers box 1, file 13, Iowa State University Special Collections.

One of the main factors in the success of Field's rural clubs was their connection to the Iowa State Extension department. After listening to a lecture given by Extension's Professor Holden at a local farmer's institute, Field approached Holden about helping her county educators teach agriculture in school. In response to her query, Holden quickly jumped at a chance to increase the study of agriculture in schools, stating, "If you will get a group of your best country teachers together—the ones who have influence in the districts and who are forward looking and devoted to the best interests of their pupils—I will come and spend all day teaching and helping them to see what they can do."<sup>81</sup> During his meeting with the Page County Progressives in 1907, Holden outlined a course of study for agriculture in local schools.<sup>82</sup> As a result, many teachers within the region began teaching agriculture in school and solidifying their role as club leader. Extension would later go on to have an even bigger impact on club growth.

However, even with the growth of agricultural clubs in Page County, the real magnitude of Field's work in 4-H can be seen in the first farm camps. The significance of these camps cannot be denied, as they were the first attempt to take these rural clubs out of a school setting. After successfully running district-wide agricultural clubs for several years, Field decided to expand the scope of the organization.

After persuading the local Chautauqua chapter to help fund this measure, Field then sent out pamphlets hoping to entice a number of boys to join in, stating, "we want

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<sup>81</sup> Jessie Field, "I Knew Professor Holden," 1957, 2, Jessie Field Papers box 1, file 12, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>82</sup> "Iowa Roots The Very Beginning: Early 4-H in Iowa," *Early Work with Farm Boys and Girls pamphlet*, no date, 93, Jessie Field Papers box 1, file 13, Iowa State University Special Collections.

every boy of this age [ten to eighteen] in Page county who is interested in farming and likes a vacation and sports.”<sup>83</sup> Once at the camp, these boys (and later girls) spent the morning listening to lectures by Extension agents on agriculture and livestock. They then devoted the rest of the day to different sporting activities, including baseball and track and field. The famous William Jennings Bryan, former presidential candidate and Populist leader, even made an appearance at this first camp.<sup>84</sup> The farm camp was so popular with Page County youth that 4-H later added a second camp for girls stating, “the girls of Page County will show their appreciation of it by trying to make their camp even a greater success than the boys.”<sup>85</sup>

Overall, Field’s farm camps were a rousing success among the rural community. Different newspapers and progressive groups commented on Field’s achievement. The children who attended the camps maintained an equally positive view. One attendee commented the he was sad to leave when it was over, and looked forward to returning the next year.<sup>86</sup> Another commented, “Everyone had great deal of respect for Miss Field

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<sup>83</sup> WM F. Stipe “Boys Farm Camp Pamphlet,” 1910, 3, Jessie Field Papers box 1, file 14, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>84</sup> B.L. Hagglund, “Experiences of Early 4-H: Observations from 40 Years Later,” November 6, 1948, Collected by R.K. Bliss, 3, Jessie Field Papers, box 1, file 13, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>85</sup> “The Clarinda Chautauqua offers to the Boys and Girls the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Boys’ Farm Camp and the First Camp of the Golden Maids,” August 9-18, 1911, 9-10, Jessie Field Papers box 1, file 14, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>86</sup> B.L. Hagglund, “Experiences of Early 4-H: Observations from 40 Years Later,” November 6, 1948, Collected by R.K. Bliss, 4, Jessie Field Papers box 1, file 13, Iowa State University Special Collections.



which made us all do the best work we could.”<sup>87</sup> Overall, the nature of this first camp would set the tone for others.

One of the greatest questions surrounding 4-H history is why these early school clubs succeeded when the rural community rejected so many other reforms. As discussed in major works of rural history like David Danbom’s *Resisted Revolution* and Hal Barron’s *Mixed Harvest*, the rural community throughout the Midwest was especially stubborn when it came to attempts at reform.<sup>88</sup> Still, the rural community did accept the early efforts of 4-H for a number of different reasons.

The first major cause for this rural acceptance was the background of the early leaders. Whereas other efforts at reform had come from outside the community, prominent rural residents helped create 4-H. One of the reasons why Page County accepted Jessie Field’s work was largely due to her ties to the community. As previously stated, Field’s parents were some of the first settlers in the area and her brother would later become a prominent businessman within the township of Clarinda. His business connections would later help Field spread her school programs. Using his company to publish a book she had written, Field was then able send out free copies to every school within the district. This book, called *Farm Arithmetic*, clearly set out Field’s thoughts on the changing nature of rural schooling: “There is a great general demand that the school train for life. More than ever before, the people are asking that out country schools give

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<sup>87</sup> Lisle, personal letter to Ruth, “Jessie Field and the First Farm Camps,” August 1989, 1, Jessie Field Papers box 1, file 14, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>88</sup> David B. Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1979) and Hal S. Barron, *Mixed Harvest: the Second Great Transformation in the Rural North, 1870-1930* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

the boys and girls real, practical, living problems.”<sup>89</sup> Field then emphasized the importance of the teacher in the community and her duty to inspire the next generation of rural people writing, “She can make the school the real center of the neighborhood and an influence which is felt in every home. Above all, she can arouse in the boy and girl a love for home, for the country, and for the farm.”<sup>90</sup> Without her background, the local community might have rejected Field’s reforms.

Furthermore, the larger community also accepted the organizations because they were widely endorsed by prominent members. For one, newspaper giant Henry Wallace readily approved of the growing club. Owner and editor of the rural paper *Wallace’s Farmer*, Wallace celebrated the role of the farmer in American society and the continuation of rural values and traditions. Although no doubt influenced by urban progressive movements, Wallace also seemed to hold the rural community’s interest at heart. In fact, he appeared to share the same mistrust of city interests that many farmers held. Writing an article in *Wallace’s Farmer* about the educational needs of farm children, Wallace expressed his distrust of urban reformers looking to improve farm education, “Every city consumer will agree that the farmer must be educated, not so much because he wants to help the farmer, but in the hope that educated farmers may mean cheaper farm products.”<sup>91</sup> Simply put, Wallace was a popular and critical member of the rural community, as many read his paper and trusted his viewpoints.

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<sup>89</sup> Jessie Field, “Excerpts” *Farm Arithmetic*, no date, 1, Jessie Field Papers, box 1, file 13, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Henry Wallace, “Education for the Farm Boy,” 1910, 4, *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth* 1:1, Iowa State University Special Collections.

One of the chief reasons why Wallace openly endorsed early 4-H efforts was because of his own activity in rural youth organizations. For example, Wallace created his own statewide “corn club” for Iowa boys. Paul Taff, who later became the state leader of 4-H, would join this club in 1904, partly to obtain the free quart of seed corn it offered.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, after Wallace heard of local efforts to craft rural clubs within schools, he candidly expressed his admiration and support. In 1905, *Wallace’s Farmer* ran an article supporting the school efforts of Keokuk City, a development that would merge with 4-H.<sup>93</sup>

Beyond Henry Wallace and the support of the media, other prominent progressive organizations also gave their support to early efforts. The Young Men’s Christian Association, better known as the YMCA, took part in hosting Field’s farm camps in 1910 and 1911. In charge of the camp’s general welfare was their state secretary Fred Hansen. Additionally, the Chautauqua movement also made an appearance during these early farm camps. Needing sponsorship and a place to host the event, Field went directly to her local Chautauqua. After donating their land for the camp’s use, this group also placed the camps within their summer program, allowing for greater access to others.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> “Bridging the gap: He recalls when it was only 3-H,” *Chicago Sun Times*, Tuesday November 30, 1971, 25 in Paul Taff Papers box 1, file 6, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>93</sup> Cap E. Miller, “The Keokuks and Their Work,” *Wallace’s Farmer*, December 22, 1905, 4.

<sup>94</sup> “The Mother of 4-H,” article, no date, 1, Jessie Field Papers box 1, file 13, Iowa State University Special Collections.

While some might question the importance of these distinctly progressive groups on the rural community, their impact in early 4-H should not be understated. Although some of these groups were originally based in reactions against rapid urbanization (especially the YMCA), they fulfilled a critical need within 4-H with their reputation and wealth. Simply put, Field would have been unable to host these camps without the funds offered by both groups. The money donated by both groups allowed the camps to lower the cost of admission, allowing for more children to join. The local Chautauqua chapter also offered to host the camps on their land. Ultimately, both the YMCA and the Chautauqua name lent authority to these farm camps.<sup>95</sup>

Even more vital to 4-H's rural acceptance was the club's endorsement by institutes of higher education. This was mostly due to the connection between 4-H's early efforts and Iowa State's Extension Department. As already discussed, the Extension Department played a large role in fostering these clubs, including Professor Holden's work with the Page County teachers as well as the presence of department agents at Field's early farm camps. But Extension's support extended beyond their actual help. Like with the YMCA and the local Chautauqua chapter, the Extension Department's name gave 4-H an educational authority it lacked before. Because prominent "corn men" endorsed and worked in tandem with the club, the community accepted 4-H's rural classes and projects for their children

In fact, it is the early 4-H's focus on children that also allowed for greater rural acceptance where other reform movements failed. While 4-H fostered and even

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<sup>95</sup> Michael E. McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 248-279.

encouraged connections to the adult community, the group targeted was children. Down to the club's very setting (schools), 4-H centered directly on rural children. Club projects and contests were only open to youth members, though parents often provided resources. Moreover, unlike other rural recreation events like county fairs or Chautauqua lectures, 4-H's farm camps were for children only. Although there were adult leaders who maintained the camp schedule and ran the different programs, the attendees were overwhelmingly children.<sup>96</sup> This allowed the club to seem less threatening than other reforms. Children often represented a chance for change when adults stubbornly clung to traditions. While parents might be unwilling to make certain changes in their life, children were more biddable. Within this line of reasoning, 4-H signified a chance for the rural community to adapt to a changing world.

Another explanation why Iowa's rural community welcomed 4-H as a children's organization was because it was far less threatening than other youth clubs. For example, the Farm Boy Cavaliers provide a great counterpoint to 4-H. Founded by Dexter D. Mayne, a reformer looking to revamp rural education, this youth organization hoped to solve widening rural depopulation. However, in order to provide an answer to that problem, Mayne's program became increasingly radical. Promoting a system that asked rural parents to pay their children for their work and grant them more freedom, the Farm Boy Cavaliers threatened traditional parental authority and ultimately failed to gain

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<sup>96</sup> Lisle, personal letter to Ruth, "Jessie Field and the First Farm Camps," August 1989, 1, Jessie Field Papers box 1, file 14, Iowa State University Special Collections.

acceptance of the wider rural community.<sup>97</sup> In this aspect, 4-H succeed where Mayne's organization failed. While 4-H promoted reforms in education (mostly in adding agriculture to the school curriculum), it was inclusive rather than exclusive. It did not threaten parental authority or jeopardize to change traditional customs. Ultimately, 4-H sought parental approval and looked to reaffirm rural traditions.

However, as significant as 4-H's focus on children was to its overall reception, that reason paled in comparison with the overall need it filled within Iowa's rural community. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, rural America struggled with depopulation. It became increasingly clear as the years passed that the country was slowly giving way to the city. This struck fear into many, as people dreaded the loss of rural traditions and the rural lifestyle. These people cited many reasons for this shift in population, including deficient rural education and lack of social and recreational opportunities for farm youth. Ultimately, the reason why Iowa's rural community welcomed 4-H was because it looked to fill these dire needs.

Starting with the schools, 4-H was foremost an educational club focused on rural studies. People had long been worried that local schools were educating youth "away from the farm." As one Iowa Homestead article stated, "To our mind the most glaring and principle reason why boys leave the farm is because they have been educated away from the soil."<sup>98</sup> Many in the rural community complained that schools influenced farm youth away from the country. They implied that teachers knew little about what it took

<sup>97</sup> Pamela, Riney-Kehrberg, "Farm Youth and Progressive Agricultural Reform: Dexter D. Mayne and the Farm Boy Cavaliers of America," *Agricultural History* 85, 4 (Fall, 2011): 437-459.

<sup>98</sup> "The Boys Leaving the Farm," *Iowa Homestead*, January 26, 1899, 1.

to be a successful farmer. Many people wrote in to rural papers bemoaning the lack of practical education. These same writers also stressed their suspicion of the impact some teachers had on impressionable students. Even one city-trained educator could easily drive youth away from their rural community with stories of the glamorous urban lifestyle. One schoolmarm wrote in warning families to make sure they understood who their children's teachers were and what they taught in the schools.<sup>99</sup>

This is one of the explanations why Field and her rural clubs made such an impact on the community. Beyond her obvious rural background, her agricultural clubs satisfied the desire for both scientific and practical education. Parents and other rural residents no longer needed to fear what was being taught to their children, as 4-H promoted parental involvement. Moreover, the projects sponsored by the club were distinctly in line with rural pursuits. Projects based on testing seed corn, developing canning techniques, and evaluating desirable animal traits would only improve farm knowledge. This obvious focus on rural customs led to greater acceptance.

Besides fulfilling educational needs, local rural communities also identified with 4-H because it created more social and recreational opportunities for farm youth. Socialization quickly became one of the principle concerns for those worried about depopulation. Many people wrote to both *Wallace's Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* lamenting the monotony of the countryside. One farmer suggested that school agricultural clubs would solve the problem, noting "These clubs and organizations will

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<sup>99</sup> "What the Schoolma'am Thinks," *Wallace's Farmer*, December 22, 1911, 2.

of themselves solve the question: How are we to keep our boys and girls on the farm.”<sup>100</sup> Other writers asserted similar ideas, presenting spelling schools, singing groups, and other clubs as opportunities for rural youth.<sup>101</sup> In line with these desires, 4-H easily fulfilled the need for socialization. Members were able to meet other children outside of the normal pattern of socialization, as the club offered rural youth a multitude of lectures, project fairs, and socials to attend. Additionally, the recreational activities hosted by the club also prompted even more positive responses. The farm camps, educational contests, and opportunities to travel broke the perceived monotony of rural life.<sup>102</sup> This eventually led the club to become a staple in rural Iowa.

However, even with the great growth and acceptance of this club by the rural community, the educational era of 4-H came to an end by 1914. This is perhaps one of the most peculiar events in the history of the club, as the marriage between Iowa schools and this rural youth organization seemed beneficial to both sides. 4-H could continue to gain notoriety and members while the local schools could help solve the problem of rural socialization. The state school superintendent even wrote of this problem in his 1910-1912 annual report, stating:

The school must become a greater factor in preparing our boys and girls to solve the social, educational and economic problems of the day. Chance must give way to choice in these matters. Farm problems are not confined to the tilling and the fertilization of the land. There are social and educational

<sup>100</sup> “Keep the Boys and Girls on the Farm,” *Wallace’s Farmer*, February 3, 1905, 5.

<sup>101</sup> “Lack of Sociability Among Farmer,” *Wallace’s Farmer*, February 24, 1911, 3.

<sup>102</sup> Paul Taff Papers box 1 and box 2, Iowa State University Special Collections.



questions of equally as much importance as those relating to the soil, connected with country life.”<sup>103</sup>

And yet, the Department of Public Instruction ruled essentially to block the developing organization from the schools not two years later. In the end, multiple factors of school consolidation, power battles between the state and county superintendents, and 4-H’s connection to Extension would lead to the split.

The struggle over school consolidation in rural areas has been well documented in the historiography. By the early twentieth century, education reformers throughout the country attempted to collectively consolidate one of the most enduring symbols of rural America, the one-room schoolhouse. The rural community thoroughly rejected this reform effort. Where urban reformers saw a grubby classroom with poor teachers, district farmers perceived a bastion of local control. It was a toxic mixture that soon led to all out war between local communities and the state school board, as both vied for control over the future of Iowa’s schools.<sup>104</sup>

It was the state board’s focus on school consolidation that pushed other, less controversial modifications to the backburner. One of these other reforms included teaching agriculture in school, a movement which 4-H played a critical role. In spite

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<sup>103</sup> Albert M. Deyoe, *State Superintendent Annual Report 1910-1912*, (Des Moines: State Printer Robert Henderson, 1912), 7-8.

<sup>104</sup> Audrey Shoemaker, The beginnings of agricultural education in Midwestern rural schools, 1895-1915, M.A. diss., Iowa State University, In *Dissertations & Theses @ Iowa State University* [database on-line]; available from <http://www.proquest.com.proxy.lib.iastate.edu:2048> (publication number AAT 1476348; accessed April 9, 2012).

of all the state board's statements about looking to add agriculture to the current curriculum, its concentration remained thoroughly on school consolidation. In an attempt to crush continuing resistance, the state board helped push a new school tuition bill through the state legislature. This bill was especially troubling for rural districts, as it increased the tax levy for schools while forcing each district to support a four-year high school.<sup>105</sup> Because most local areas were not willing or able to afford their own high school, many districts would have been forced to consolidate. Ultimately, the state board's concern with consolidation pushed the success of other reforms (like 4-H) to the side, helping the Department of Public Institution justify the eventual split.

However, the struggle over school consolidation would also reveal an even greater battle in Iowa's education, one that would have a large influence on the final split. As the twentieth century continued, it became increasingly obvious there was a battle over who would control local education, county superintendents or the state board. The tuition bill brought even greater animosity between the two groups, as many superintendents refused to comply with the attempts at consolidation. Reacting to what they saw as insubordination, the state board then withheld funding from those schools. The response was explosive. Superintendents all over the state sent outraged letters to Des Moines, demanding financial support.<sup>106</sup> One writer was so unpleasant in his letter that he provoked an equally disagreeable response from the state office,

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<sup>105</sup> *State Superintendent Annual Report, 1910-1912*, Iowa Historical Archives, 13.

<sup>106</sup> *Letters to the Superintendent of Public Institution December 29, 1913- February 21, 1914*, Box 098, 30-121, Iowa Historical Archives.

with the state superintendent writing, ““I do not think I have received a letter since I have been in the office more unjust and more unmanly than the one received from you.”<sup>107</sup> Still, even with the flurry of letters, the battle between these two groups would not be solved until after World War II.

Eventually, this struggle between the state and county superintendents would hurt 4-H’s image in the eyes of the state board. While there was no evidence suggesting that any 4-H leaders sided with the county administrators, many prominent regional superintendents (like Jessie Field, Captain Miller, and O.H. Benson) played a large role within the club. Considering the number of accolades they received from *both* urban and rural institutions, it made complete sense for the state department to be wary of their growing power. Ultimately, like a jealous dog guarding its food, the state board looked to block any future problems by cutting off 4-H from the schools.

Finally, the leading cause of the split can be attributed to possibility of another power struggle, involving the Iowa State Extension Department and the state board. Although it had been around since the early twentieth century, the Extension Department in Ames received a huge boost, both monetarily and ideologically, when the federal government formalized a national Extension Service with the Smith-Lever Act of 1914.<sup>108</sup> Flush with cash, Extension took control of 4-H, widened it to a state-level, and started training local teachers in agriculture. Just as the state board

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<sup>107</sup> Albert M. Deyoe, “Personal letter to F.H. Sunderlin,” January 7, 1914, 107, in *Letters to the Superintendent of Public Institution December 29, 1913- February 21, 1914*, Box 098, Iowa Historical Archives.

<sup>108</sup> David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country*, (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 169-171.

distrusted the power of prominent county superintendents, they also disliked the control Extension had over teachers. In the end, this proved to be too much for the state board to take. With the “objection” of other agencies in 1914, Extension was barred from training teachers.<sup>109</sup> This effectively split the local schools from the now Extension-led clubs. The educational era of 4-H was now over.

Writing in reflection on the early years of the club, Paul Taff (Extension junior worker and state club leader from 1919 to 1952) agreed that the line between the schools and the clubs was meant to be broken. One of the main benefits of this separation was the greater involvement of the rural community. As Taff remembered, “This may have been fortunate in one respect, namely, that because of the changing of the policy of no longer having the schools as the center of club work, it was necessary to develop the adult volunteer leadership plan which since had been so successful.”<sup>110</sup> This, of course, allowed parents and other members of the rural community more control over the content and focus of the club. Realistically, 4-H no longer needed the schools to maintain its membership and hold on the rural community. Now an independent organization, 4-H was ready to take the next step in its history.

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<sup>109</sup> Paul C. Taff, “A Brief History of the Origin and Development of the 4-H Clubs in Iowa,” April 1961, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth* 1:1, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER 4

## THE BEST BETTER

The year 1914 was a watershed in world history. With the start of the Great War in Europe, some historians have argued that 1914 was the start of today's modern world. This year also signified a major turning point in the history of Iowa's Extension and its youth club, 4-H. Through the ratification of the Smith-Lever Act, the Extension Service became a national organization intent on reforming the countryside. However, even as Extension sought to restructure rural America in the image of the Country Life Movement, early 4-H resembled its agrarian roots far more than its urban invention.

Ultimately, this chapter will answer the major question surrounding Iowa's early 4-H experiment: why did it survive and thrive becoming the national organization it is today? Moreover, why was this club able to endure the potentially devastating split from Iowa's public schools? In order to fully understand the answers to these questions, this chapter will trace Iowa's 4-H history from the 1914 separation from the school districts to the post-war years of 1919 through 1920.<sup>111</sup> It will examine several critical events in 4-H history, including the passage of the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 and the advent of World War One. Finally, this chapter will inspect one of the important attributes of the club, its innate ability to adapt. Always a crucial part of any organization looking to succeed, early 4-H excelled at adapting to both the local needs and gender roles of the rural community. Because of timely funding, the start of the First World War, and the

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<sup>111</sup> Some earlier and later records will be used support arguments under the locality and gender sections of this work.

organization's ability to adapt to fit different needs, the early Boys and Girls Club developed into the powerhouse 4-H is today.

In order to grow and develop as a club however, 4-H first needed to survive the break from the schools. As explained in the previous chapter, Iowa's Department of Public Instruction blocked Extension from the schools in 1914. Iowa State's Extension Service was no longer allowed to train teachers in agricultural studies or livestock judging. This included the discontinuation of popular teacher training courses, which covered topics ranging from crops, soils, and livestock, to home economics. While no existing records detail the scope of these training sessions, reports do offer a glimpse at their popularity. In one 1912 report, E.C. Bishop (who replaced A.C. Storms as state club leader) wrote, "There has been a remarkable increase in the number of teachers desiring assistance in the teaching of agriculture and home economics. At present we have enrolled 1409 teachers."<sup>112</sup> Given that Extension was still in its infancy, it seems likely that enrollment would have only increased with more time and energy. However, much to the disappointment of many, this 1914 ruling forced Extension to move on. In the words of Paul Taff, "This was most unfortunate for at no time since has there been as many rural teachers studying how to teach agriculture as there were in 1914 and 1915."<sup>113</sup>

However, this ruling was more than just a simple suspension of training sessions. It was an all out fracture of Extension's connection to Iowa's Boys and Girls Clubs.

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<sup>112</sup> R.K. Bliss, "The Bishop Report," 13-15, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth* 1:1, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

With this verdict, Extension not only lost its connection to its members, local leaders, and meeting environment, but local clubs also lost their link to the larger state organization. It is important to remember that these local youth clubs were only loosely connected to one another. Although a few county leaders shared information and ideas with one another, like O.H. Benson of Wright County and Jessie Field of Page, most were islands unto themselves.<sup>114</sup> Almost all club meetings took place within the county, with activities only extending as far as the local teacher's knowledge went. It was only with Iowa State's Extension that a larger association began to emerge, with similar projects, literature, training, and rewards. By cutting Extension off from the schools, Iowa's Department of Public Instruction essentially severed the link between the local clubs and the greater movement. Out of all the resources 4-H stood to lose with this ruling, the disconnection between the Extension Service and its young members was potentially the most devastating. An organization is nothing without constituents and if Extension wanted to 4-H to succeed, it needed to maintain its membership.

However, while the potential disconnection from youth membership was significant, the loss of local teachers and the school environment had the greatest impact on Extension's 4-H. Ever since Captain Miller of Keokuk County started his work in 1903, county educators at all levels had played a critical role in expanding the reach of 4-H.<sup>115</sup> In general, teachers represented the largest segment of 4-H's early staff. While

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<sup>114</sup> O.H. Benson, personal letter, April 17, 1947, 1-3, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth 1:1*, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>115</sup> Iowa School Report Extract, "Boys Agricultural Clubs and Girls Home Culture Club," 1904-1905, 1, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth 1:1*, Iowa State University Special Collections.

Extension provided academic literature and training sessions to these educators, local teachers were responsible for the clubs' day-to-day operations. It was these educators who kept local enrollment, selected what projects would be done by the club members, planned excursions and socials, and dealt with any problems that arose.<sup>116</sup> For example, although Extension supplied Page County's educators with corn judging information, it was Jessie Field and her teacher who *actually* decided to host a corn-judging contest in 1908.<sup>117</sup> It was the teachers who guided the participants and read the reports from the club members, rather than Extension. This model can further be illustrated by looking at girls' sewing clubs in 1912. Whereas Iowa State's Extension provided the literature and expected a report to filled out by the club member, it was the local teacher who taught the design, reviewed progress, and ultimately deemed the effort successful or not. It was only then that teachers passed on superior work to larger state contests judged by Extension.<sup>118</sup> Much like frontline soldiers, teachers represented a critical piece of early 4-H's organization.

Beyond their frontline leadership, teachers also were a key ally in selling 4-H to the local community. While some people feared the potential influence teachers could have on children, for the most part, the rural community accepted the function of teachers in their community. These men and women were often from the same area as their school and knew the unique circumstances of the region. This can be seen in Jessie

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<sup>116</sup> "Records of club enrollments and projects in Iowa," 1906-1912, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth* 1:1, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>117</sup> Janice Nahra Friedal, "Jessie Field," *The Palimpsest*, 62:4, July/August 1981, 104-105, in *Jessie Field Papers* box 1, file 9, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>118</sup> Iowa State College Extension Department, "Hat Making Circular," 1912, 1-5, in *Jessie Field Papers* box 1, file 13, Iowa State University Special Collections.



Field's unlikely appointment as Page County Superintendent. Although Field was well-educated and experienced, it was possible that her selection was based on her familiarity rather than her knowledge (especially because of her sex). And yet, once elected, Field used her understanding of Page County to adapt her youth clubs to fit the specific needs of this community. For example, one of the most popular youth clubs (for both student-members and their parents) was the road-grading club, which smoothed some of Iowa's notoriously bad roads.<sup>119</sup> Field was not unique in her acquaintance with the rural community, as teachers through the state used their knowledge to adapt.

For this reason alone, 4-H needed teachers to help with local boys and girls clubs. Extension required these educators not only for their local knowledge but also their ability to bridge the gap between agricultural experts and district farmers. They were the direct link between the community and larger organizations. At a time when other efforts to reform rural America were failing, rural teachers proved to be an important ally in gaining trust and introducing new ideas to the rural community.<sup>120</sup> Extension recognized this and used it to its advantage. This employment can be seen in one 1912 Extension report, in which Scott County agent G.R. Bliss asked local teachers to present a project to their students, writing, "Just now we would like to have you present the matter to your pupils and ask them to enroll on the inclosed blank if they are

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<sup>119</sup> Janice Nahra Friedal, "Jessie Field," *The Palimpsest*, 62:4, July/August 1981, 103, in *Jessie Field Papers* box 1, file 9, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>120</sup> David B. Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution*. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1979 and Hal S. Barron, *Mixed Harvest: the Second Great Transformation in the Rural North, 1870-1930*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

interested.”<sup>121</sup> By using teachers, rather than new agents, Extension looked to familiarity to increase membership and interest. Unfortunately, with the State Board’s ruling, Extension was not longer able to utilize teachers as both local leaders for their club and as ambassadors for their ideas to the rural community.

But this 1914 verdict rendered more than just teachers off limits, it also denied Extension access to the very settings of club work. With few exceptions (Jessie Field’s farm camps and some scattered field trips), almost all club activities centered in the schools. It was within the schools that teachers first introduced children to club work, where they met to discuss projects and problems, and finally where members presented their final reports. If Extension was no longer allowed access to this environment, it would have to find a completely new place to host events and meetings. Although local Farmers’ Institutes may have helped in this endeavor, these organizations ultimately focused on adults rather than children. As of early 1914, Extension had neither the time nor the money to create a whole new foundation for the local clubs. With the severing of membership ties, loss of local leadership, and a sudden deficiency in proper club environments, it seemed likely that 4-H would pass on like so many other organizations.

Luckily, 1914 proved to be a watershed moment for not only Iowa’s early 4-H efforts, but also for rural progressivism in general. Signaling a desire to reform America’s rural society, Congress passed the Smith-Lever Act in 1914. Although some form of Extension had been active on the national level, and one conference of state leaders met as early as 1911, this act provided the United States Department of

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<sup>121</sup> G.R. Bliss “Letter to the Teachers of Scott County,” December 3, 1912, 1, in Paul Taff Papers box 6, file 2, Iowa State University Special Collections.

Agriculture the funding to support outreach programs throughout the country.<sup>122</sup> So essentially, by nationalizing the Extension Service, early 4-H became a nationwide program. This immediately provided Iowa's boys and girls clubs the funding and organization they needed not only to survive, but also to thrive as an important community program.

Part of this thriving had to do with the abundance of funding now provided to Extension. Whereas pre-1914 financial support depended directly on the generosity of local communities and Iowa's educational system, Extension now had funding from the federal government. Starting with the year of 1914, the USDA granted an amount of \$10,000 dollars to be given to each state's agricultural college in order to maintain or start an Extension Service. In addition, the Smith-Lever Act added a supplementary amount of \$600,000 for the fiscal year of 1914-1915.<sup>123</sup> In terms of dollar value in 2011, that amount translated to nearly \$250 million in national Extension funding.<sup>124</sup> Moreover, this amount would only increase the as United States crept closer and closer to entering World War One. Over the next seven years, the USDA allocated at least \$500,000 each year to Extension. Overall, the federal government pumped \$4,580,000 into national Extension by the fiscal year of 1922-1923.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> O.H. Benson and Gertrude Warren, "Organization and Results of Boys' and Girls' Club Work 1918 USDA Circular," February 1920, 4, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth 1:1*, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 4-6.

<sup>124</sup> MeasuringWorth, "Relative Value Calculator," MeasuringWorth.com, <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/relativevalue>, (accessed January 28, 2013).

<sup>125</sup> O.H. Benson and Gertrude Warren, "Organization and Results of Boys' and Girls' Club Work 1918 USDA Circular," February 1920, 4-6, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth 1:1*, Iowa State University Special Collections.

This increased funding only added to Extension's ability to enhance membership and club vitality. Because the Smith-Lever Act specifically rewarded states with a greater rural population, states like Iowa received even more money. This meant increased funding for club materials, prizes, agents, and publicity. Boys and Girls clubs could now afford to attract new members by offering better prizes for contests. One early member explicitly remembered joining the state club because one contest presented the winner the opportunity to visit Chicago's famous Livestock Convention. Although he did not secure victory, the boy stayed in the club for the next several years.<sup>126</sup> So instead of just offering a winter short course to club members, Extension could now bestow bigger trips, better prizes, and more opportunities with the money afforded by the 1914 Act.

Additionally, nationalized Extension now gave 4-H the stability it desperately needed. Clearly the 1914 school board ruling proved to be extremely detrimental to club's organizing efforts. However, with the federal government launching national Extension, Iowa's 4-H organizational system became stronger than ever before. For one, Extension no longer had to rely on local teachers to run their growing clubs. While teachers obviously supplied a convenient ally in managing the local clubs, they also came with several problems. Although some county teachers championed the cause of boys and girls clubs in their schools, not all could be counted on to advance the organization. In order for pre-1914 4-H to work, local teachers needed to take time out of their day to plan and grade student projects. While there is some evidence of local

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<sup>126</sup> Fred E. Ferguson, "My Wonderful Experience: A Remembrance," Undated, 1-4, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth 1:1*, Iowa State University Special Collections.

teachers gaining monetary compensation for their extra work, most seemingly did not.<sup>127</sup> This is evidenced by a vast number of appeals and training sessions from county superintendents to their local teachers. Captain Miller, Jessie Field, and O.H. Benson all held a number of training sessions over the years, hoping to entice educators to their cause.<sup>128</sup>

Beyond the problems that local teachers presented in the early organization, the bureaucracy granted by the Smith-Lever Act proved to be a critical upgrade to the former system. For instance, 4-H now gained a clear leader and chain of command. While previous club efforts offered a confusing mass of multiple organizers (local teachers, county superintendents, Extension agents, and Iowa State workers), post-1914 boys and girls clubs streamlined the process. Even George Farrell, one of the original county superintendents to introduce boys and girls clubs to his county, agreed that national Extension compelled better cooperation and club organization.<sup>129</sup> Local Extension agents either ran the clubs themselves or found volunteer leaders. They then organized county fairs and regional competitions, often leading to statewide contests. This gave 4-H members the feeling of being part of a larger organization, rather than a loosely connected group of local clubs.

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<sup>127</sup> *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth 1:1*, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>128</sup> Evidence for this can be found in numerous documents within the Taff papers, Field papers, and *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth 1.1*. All can be found in Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>129</sup> George Farrell, "Aims of Club Work," 1920, 1-6, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth 1:1*, Iowa State University Special Collections.

This bureaucracy also bestowed a clear method for dealing with problems and club expectations. Extension records indicate a timely response to issues by 4-H officials. For example, one 1919 report indicated that the hiring of part-time summer agents had not been as successful as originally hoped. These half-time agents proved inefficient, maybe due to their unfamiliarity with the local community. By the next year, Extension had responded by doing away with summer agents, thus allocating more money for other full-time agents.<sup>130</sup> This ability to deal with organizational problems also extended to raising expectations. As early 4-H became more and more visible within Iowa, Extension's capacity to offer different clubs increased. With the funding and stable organization provided by the federal government, Iowa's boys and girls clubs were set to flourish.

While the Smith-Lever Act helped stabilize 4-H after the 1914 school board ruling, Extension's boys and girls club also received a boon in the form of a world war. Although America would not enter the war until 1917, the Great War in Europe allowed 4-H to establish itself more firmly in Iowa's rural community. This war helped in a variety of different ways. It proved to be key to extending rural America's golden age of agriculture. As the countries of Europe declared war on one another in 1914, America's farmers became the world's breadbasket. Prices rose so much that rural income actually

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<sup>130</sup> Paul Taff, "Annual Report: Boys and Girls Club Work, State of Iowa," 1920, 5, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth* 1:2, Iowa State University Special Collections.

eclipsed urban domestic profits. Demand skyrocketed as the war dragged on and America's farmers (and its Extension Service) prospered.<sup>131</sup>

On whole, farmers became wealthier and this wealth translated into greater parental involvement in their children's education.<sup>132</sup> Iowa's rural community could now afford to fund more diverse boys and girls clubs, including the more expensive ones. While every county in Iowa had an established boys and girls club at the beginning of the war, Extension could now expand the programs beyond the basic corn and canning clubs. Sewing, music, garden, and a multitude of livestock clubs made their debut as the war progressed. One of the greatest examples of increasing rural profits was the advent of "Own Room" 4-H clubs. Specifically aimed at rural girls, this club educated children on the "correct" way to arrange a room. Using flowers, drapery, and furniture, female Extension agents taught young women to assemble their living spaces in eye-catching ways.<sup>133</sup> Although this was clearly an attempt by outside forces to impose middle-class urban values on America's farms, it also showcased the rise in rural wealth. While canning and garden clubs remained the most popular for girls, the expansion of this program also suggested that rising incomes now allowed family farms to move beyond simple survival.

With Europe continuing to buy up America's harvest, parents could now afford to fund their children's more expensive club projects. For instance, instead of choosing

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<sup>131</sup> David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country*, (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 180.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid*, 179-181.

<sup>133</sup> Paul Taff, "Monthly Report to USDA Office in Washington D.C.," June 1920, 5, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth* 1:2, Iowa State University Special Collections.

between different assignments, many farm children could now take on more projects. One early 4-H member remembered his father giving him both an acre of land, seed corn, and a pig to help him complete special club tasks.<sup>134</sup> Parents provided their girls with enough fabric to make not just practical dresses but stylish hats, sashes, and other fashionable items. Without the increase in profits from the war, few of these projects would have been possible.

Outside of the simple increase in wealth that the conflict provided the nation's farmers, America's entry into the war also pushed Congress to enact even more favorable legislation. Although American farmers enjoyed a considerable boost in revenue, the nation still worried that rural America would be unable to feed an expanded wartime population of hungry soldiers, refugees, and others. In order to combat this possible problem, members of Congress passed the Lever Food and Fuel Act of 1917 (sponsored by the same Representative Asbury Francis Lever who supported the Smith-Lever Act of 1914).<sup>135</sup> This allowed the government to control food prices. In addition, this law also increased the general funding of Extension. Overall, USDA funding allotted specifically for boys and girls clubs jumped from \$68,667 to \$350,000. This, combined with state financial backing, increased 4-H's national budget by over \$340,000.<sup>136</sup> By 2012 standards, that is an increase of more than six million dollars. This

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<sup>134</sup> Fred E. Ferguson, "My Wonderful Experience: A Remembrance," Undated, 1-4, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth 1:1*, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>135</sup> Ronald Schaffer, *America in the Great War: The Rise of the Welfare State*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1991), 35.

<sup>136</sup> O.H. Benson and Gertrude Warren, "Organization and Results of Boys' and Girls' Club Work 1918 USDA Circular," February 1920, 2-6, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth 1:1*, Iowa State University Special Collections.



allowed Extension to spend even more money on county agents, contest prizes, local club materials, employment of specialists, and greater publicity.

But the war offered more than just increased funding to early 4-H, it also created a new social reason to join the club. Much like other youth organizations such as the YMCA and the Boy and Girl Scouts, Extension's 4-H used patriotic duty to entice new members and volunteers. Channeling the mentality that "Food Will Win The War," into action, rural boys and girls clubs stood on the frontline of food conservation and increased rural productivity. Extension purposely modified club work to fit wartime standards, pushing its members to carry out their patriotic duty by sponsoring food drives, encouraging the purchase of war bonds, and other wartime activities. Later reports would specifically mention the manipulation of American nationalism, stating, "Club work was modified to help increase production and provide for the conservation of food, thus sacrificing many of the club principles."<sup>137</sup> This indication of sacrifice may refer to 4-H's gradual disconnection from its Progressive roots. Whereas other Progressive groups and prominent figures came under fire for their wartime dissent, 4-H continued to display a patriotic overtone. This pushed several initial principals to the background, such as the club's early desire to stop rural depopulation and improve the quality of life for the rural community. Although some of these concerns eventually made their way back into club rhetoric after the war, many never recovered the same initial enthusiasm.

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<sup>137</sup> E.C. Bishop, "Annual Report: Boys and Girls Club Work, State of Iowa," September 11, 1919, 1-2, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth* 1:2, Iowa State University Special Collections.

In many ways, 4-H benefited from America's growing wartime nationalism. As other Progressive reform groups, like the Peace Movement, labor unions, and immigrant's, reform groups, slowly dissolved as the war continued, early 4-H reigned stronger than ever. The club used hyper-nationalism to increase membership and club donations. Its status as a government program only amplified its ability to manipulate the rural community. Urging citizens to "do their part" for the war effort, adults flocked to support the club, increasing the number of unpaid volunteers and diverse clubs. With so many willing participants, 4-H was finally able to extend its reach throughout Iowa.

Despite the fact that many of Iowa's Extension records from these years were lost, other documents illustrated 4-H's increasing popularity during this time. One field report testified that volunteer county leadership dropped from 70 people in 1918 to 38 in 1919. This suggested that the war had a powerful impact on club recognition in the rural community.<sup>138</sup> Like other wartime organizations like the Red Cross or the YMCA, people viewed participation in club activities as a way to help America in the Great War. 4-H became especially successful during this time because it was able to concentrate on rural communities often ignored by more urban-focused groups. Even as volunteerism began to drop off in the late 1910s, 4-H's acknowledgment within Iowa's rural community remained high. Another 1919 state leader's report to Washington was especially telling. This document was specifically written to address the problems 4-H might face with the end of the war. 4-H's state leader at the time, E.C. Bishop, worried

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<sup>138</sup> Paul Taff, "Extract from Federal Report," Unknown, 1 in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth 1:2*, Iowa State University Special Collections.

about the loss of membership and unpaid leadership at the local level. He wrote to the federal office in Washington about these adult volunteers,

This [the end of the war] had a marked effect upon volunteer leaders. These leaders were composed of men and women who were generous with their war time work and who might well feel that with the coming of peace, they would be justified in dropping, for a time, some of their voluntary work.<sup>139</sup>

Bishop further remarked how difficult it was following the war to attract unpaid club leaders. This insinuated that 4-H's popularity increased, at least for the war, within Iowa's rural community.

As the 1910s continued, it quickly became apparent to the leaders of Extension that boys and girls clubs often succeeded when other programs failed. For a variety of reasons explained in the second chapter (endorsement by rural leaders, focus on children, and fulfillment of community needs), early 4-H proved to be popular with the rural community. Whereas other historians have argued that Extension efforts to reform rural America (including 4-H) were largely resisted, other records tell a different story.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> E.C Bishop, "Annual Report: Boys and Girls Club Work, State of Iowa," September 11, 1919, 1-2, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth* 1:2, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>140</sup> Resisted Revolution provides a strong analysis of Country Life and Extension efforts to reform the rural community. Although Danbom's work is comprehensive, he erred slightly when it comes to his analysis of boys and girls clubs. For one, Danbom's uses Extension records outside the Midwest, the geographic area in which 4-H was most successful. More specifically, he utilized records from Extension efforts in New Mexico and other western states. This fails to take into account to success of boys and girls clubs in both the Midwest and the South.

For one, associates of the USDA certainly believed that early 4-H provided Extension with a unique connection to local communities. As one annual Iowa report bluntly stated, “Not only does club work teach better agricultural and homemaking practices to the boys and girls in the work but it also spreads out and teaches the parents and many others who come in contact with it.” The report further stated that these clubs supplied a competitive, social and recreational life thoroughly lacking in rural America.

<sup>141</sup> Even officials of the federal government admitted the unique success that 4-H endowed to national extension. As C. B. Smith, Extension Chief of the North and the West, argued in 1920,

Any community which fails to enlist the interest and assistance of the boys and girls in developing its plan for agricultural and rural betterment fails signally in utilizing one of the most effective agencies there is in extension work for arousing and maintaining interest in better agriculture and for developing in its young people a love for rural life.<sup>142</sup>

This statement fully acknowledged the importance of 4-H in Extension’s attempt to reform the rural America. While other efforts often failed to enlist a response from local communities, boys and girls groups routinely brought new members in contact with Extension’s mission.

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<sup>141</sup> Paul Taff, “Annual Report: Boys and Girls Club Work, State of Iowa,” 1920, 5, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth* 1:2, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>142</sup> O.H. Benson and Gertrude Warren, “Organization and Results of Boys’ and Girls’ Club Work 1918 USDA Circular,” February 1920, 2, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth* 1:1, Iowa State University Special Collections.

This was especially true when it came to gaining the trust of rural parents. One of the greatest problems that Extension had to overcome was resistance by the older members of the rural community. Simply put, many farmers resented the notion that they did not understand the “proper” way to farm.<sup>143</sup> Early 4-H circumvented this dilemma by targeting children rather than their more aggressive parents. By educating rural youth, Extension hoped to gently corral their stubborn parents *and* slow rural depopulation. In terms of success, this method proved more lucrative than other techniques.<sup>144</sup>

Clubs focusing on rural women tended to be much more successful than their male counterparts. Despite being one of the least funded clubs, canning groups far outstripped other more masculine groups like corn. In one month alone, Girl’s club state leader Jacqueline Arnquist boosted canning club enrollment from 15 to 91 members in one township.<sup>145</sup> 4-H’s monthly records frequently praised the achievement of these associations, stating that these groups continually managed to bring in adult farmwomen as well as their daughters. One local Wapsie Valley group even called themselves the

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<sup>143</sup> David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country*, (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 174.

<sup>144</sup> Historians have long debated the overall success or failure of Extension programs on rural communities. David Danbom claimed that Extension efforts were largely resisted, while other historians of rural women (like Mary Neth, Melissa Walker, and anthropologist Jane Adams) noted that Extension’s desire to impose middle class values on the farmstead deeply influenced the rural community and ultimately led to lessening of female power in the rural household. In terms of this thesis, success will be defined as the ability of the Extension to integrate itself into the community. This means tracking 4-H’s overall acceptance through membership, projects completed, happiness of members, as well as the club’s ability to incorporate adults into Extension philosophy.

<sup>145</sup> Paul Taff, “Monthly Report to USDA Office in Washington D.C.: Mahaska County.” February 1920, 7, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth* 1:2, Iowa State University Special Collections.

“Mothers and Daughters Sewing Club.”<sup>146</sup> Once engaged in club work, Extension hoped to impress upon these women the importance of health and middle class domesticity. However, the real reason why these rural girls joined the canning and sewing clubs in droves had more to do with their desire for community rather than information. Canning groups, sewing associations, and other female-based club work represented a chance for women of all ages to connect with other local females. Especially given the loneliness of rural life at this time, these clubs offered women an assembly in which to talk, laugh, discuss issues of the day, and share information.<sup>147</sup>

Although these 4-H sponsored groups may have not been the first female-centered clubs in their respected counties (with political organizations like the Grange, Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, and even Church groups allowing rural women a chance to socialize), they were the first to focus on young girls. Whereas other associations may have dwelled on other topics (such as politics or religion), 4-H’s home demonstration clubs emphasized education and health. For example, worried about the impact of fashionable high heels on rural girls, assistant state leader Josephine Arnquist made it a priority throughout the state’s sewing clubs. Stressing the need for proper shoes, Arnquist stated, “High heels and county roads are discussed at length.”<sup>148</sup> These clubs sought to educate as well as provide opportunities for socialization. Groups with local female leaders especially flourished. Unsurprisingly, one county agent noted that, “we

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<sup>146</sup> Paul Taff, “Monthly Report to USDA Office in Washington D.C..” June 1920, 7-8, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth* 1:2, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>147</sup> Lu Ann Jones, *Mama Learned Us to Work: Farm Women in the New South*, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 106-138.

<sup>148</sup> Paul Taff, “Monthly Report to USDA Office in Washington D.C..” June 1920, 6, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth* 1:2, Iowa State University Special Collections.

are finding that the best committees are composed of women who actually live on farms and know farm problems.”<sup>149</sup>

In many ways, the success of female-driven groups, as well as the overall ascendancy of 4-H in the rural community, can be traced to its ability to adapt to rural gender norms. While the ideology of separate spheres has long dominated the historical study of women, this philosophy cannot be easily applied to rural women.<sup>150</sup> Starting with historians Joan Jensen and Nancy Grey Osterud, scholars questioned its relevance to country life. One thing that all historians can agree on was that rural women had very different roles than their urban sisters. In most cases, farmwomen had much greater fluidity within their household and their community. As these women worked to maintain their families, many crossed typical gender boundaries to work in the field and in the barn. Rural females sold dairy products and eggs, tended large gardens, threshed, and ran farm equipment, all while managing the household, caring for children, and maintaining other traditional forms of female labor. Outside of the home, rural women also played a large role within the rural community. They ran church groups,

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<sup>149</sup> Paul Taff, “Monthly Report to USDA Office in Washington D.C.: Black Hawk County,” May 1920, 5, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth* 1:2, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>150</sup> Although originally created by Barbara Welter in her 1966 article “The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860,” historian Nancy Cott is best known for this theory in her 1977 work *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835*. This ideology argues that society regulated women to the private, domestic sphere, while men worked in the public sphere of politics and economics. While many historians argue against the application of this theory on all American women, it remains one of the major frameworks of historical study.

administered charities, and even involved themselves in local and national politics.<sup>151</sup> In the end, although national Extension desired to impose middle class values on farmstead, in many ways, 4-H actually reflected the gender standards of rural America, rather than urban.

This fluidity can be seen within Extension's many clubs offered to both boys and girls. For one, 4-H's actual name offered a clue to its gender fluidity. Whereas urban youth organizations like the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and Campfire Girls separated themselves based on gender, 4-H was a boys *and* girls' club. Though the club had separate state leaders and different programs for boys and girls, both received their funding from the state and answered to the same state office. Likewise, while some clubs had a distinct gender tint to them (such as corn clubs for boys and canning groups for girls), several other clubs offered themselves to both males and females. These included the gender flexible activities of raising poultry and cultivating certain plants like beets or soybeans.<sup>152</sup> This reflected the gender elasticity that was often present on farmsteads. When work needed to be done, not even gender norms would hinder familial survival.

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<sup>151</sup> There were several books and articles written on the subject of female involvement in rural politics. One of the first, Ann Hallowell's article "Women on the Threshold," discussed the pattern between population and female participation. Other works, such as Donald Marti's *Women of the Grange* and Robert Lawrence's "Women in Populism" studied women in larger political movements. Ann Hallowell, "Women on the Threshold: An Analysis of Rural Women in Local Politics, 1921-1941," *Rural Sociology* 52 (1987): 510-521; Donald Marti, *Women of the Grange: Mutuality and Sisterhood in Rural America, 1866-1920*, (Westport: CT: Greenwood, 1991) 163-252; Lawrence E. Roberts, "Women in Populism, 1888-1892." *Heritage of the Great Plains* 23 (1990): 15-27.

<sup>152</sup> Paul Taff, "Monthly Report to USDA Office in Washington D.C.." May 1920, 4-6, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth* 1:2, Iowa State University Special Collections.



Moreover, like other aspects of country life, rural communities were more likely to accept women performing typically male activities in the barn and in the field. Even within the early years of 4-H, there was a distinct mutability to gender-specific actions. For example, Extension quickly confronted the problem of exactly *who* would be doing the livestock judging at a local level. Teachers, the local leaders of these youth clubs, were overwhelmingly female.<sup>153</sup> This created a bit of a dilemma for Extension. While raising poultry and even dairy cows could be considered female activities, beef cattle and pigs definitely were not. However, Extension did not have enough male members to take on the growing volume of evaluations. By 1908, after what seemed a great deal of internal debate, Extension offered a livestock and corn judging summer course for all teachers, male and female. Although it is unclear whether or not Extension taught female teachers the art of corn judging, records suggested that they were instructed in livestock evaluation. As R.K. Bliss, future head of Extension, indicated, “Some fears were entertained as to the practicability of having some lady school teachers place livestock but these fears proved groundless. The judging slips were well written out and the work done and reasons given compared favorably with similar work done by men in short courses held for farmers.”<sup>154</sup> This suggested that like farm household, Extension would utilize women to fulfill traditionally male roles if necessity required it.

<sup>153</sup> Audrey Shoemaker, “The beginnings of agricultural education in Midwestern rural schools, 1895-1915” (Master’s Thesis, Iowa State University, 2010).

<sup>154</sup> R.K. Bliss, “4-H History: Covering the period of July 1, 1906- July 1, 1914,” 1952, 13, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth* 1:1, Iowa State University Special Collections.

As these local clubs slowly developed in early 4-H, gender fluidity continued to be present throughout the youth club. Beyond the gender-neutral garden and chicken organizations, records also suggested that some localities might have offered girls a chance to involve themselves in typically male dealings. This can be seen in several county reports from local agents. One Des Moines County Extension agent wrote in June 1920 that nineteen boys *and* girls enrolled in the Pure Bred Pig Gilt club (to raise different types of hogs, such as a Poland China or a Duroc).<sup>155</sup> Another agent from Clarke County also indicated a similar precedent, commenting that this Pure Bred club was a new experience for the boys and girls involved.<sup>156</sup> This pattern continued throughout 1920, with county agents continuing to denote female involvement in sheep, pig, and cattle clubs throughout Iowa.

Furthermore, Extension records also implied that gender fluidity existed within the realm of contests and prizes. Unlike the rigidity of some adult organizations, 4-H's male and female members often competed for similar accolades, even against one another. In 1920, young Grace Whitley of Fayette County won the prize for best heifer, competing against male members.<sup>157</sup> 4-H also offered similar prizes to boys and girls, an Extension short course at State College. Whether or not victorious girls were then compelled to take the female-specific course on the household was not indicated. However, just the fact that Extension allowed female members to share in and compete against boys showcased a great degree of flexibility within this youth group.

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<sup>155</sup> Paul Taff, "Monthly Report to USDA Office in Washington D.C.." June 1920, 6, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth* 1:2, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

This elasticity within the local groups also extended to the overall makeup of Extension's 4-H organization. Women involved themselves in all aspects of the club, from the local female club members, the county home demonstration agents, all the way up to assistant state leaders. As previously mentioned, female members of Extension often had more success than their male colleagues. Typical feminine activities like canning and gardening were often the best attended. Female agents also made important contributions to evolution of 4-H's policies. Jessie Field was one of the first local educators to reach out to Iowa State's Extension.<sup>158</sup> Assistant State Leader Josephine Arnquist led the first international venture of 4-H, guiding the journey of two Iowa girls through western Europe.<sup>159</sup> A woman even formulated the phrase that would become 4-H's national motto, "Making the Best Better."<sup>160</sup>

However, this is not to say that 4-H represented complete equality or a freedom from rural patriarchy. In fact, in many ways, 4-H served to reinforce male dominance in the countryside. Mutuality between men and women was present, but so was patriarchy. Several clubs stressed the rigidity that also existed in rural Iowa. Extension records show that no girls participated in corn clubs and boys did not join groups devoted to the domestic arts. Additionally, although often the most successful Extension clubs, home demonstration groups were the least funded and their agents earned less than their male counterparts. They also answered directly to the male superiors, with Perry Holden and

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<sup>158</sup> Jessie Field, "I Knew Professor P.G. Holden," 1957, 1-2, in Jessie Field Papers box 1, file 9, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>159</sup> Paul Taff, "Annual Report: Boys and Girls Club Work, State of Iowa," 1920, 4, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth* 1:2, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>160</sup> O.B. Martin, "Development of the 4-H Emblem," undated, 1, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth* 1:1, Iowa State University Special Collections.

then Paul Taff making executive decisions over the female branch of 4-H.<sup>161</sup> This patriarchy easily paralleled the accepted social customs of rural America. Even as agrarian women performed male tasks, society still limited their choices and often downgraded their overall value. Adult fathers, brothers, and husbands held ultimate authority over their female relations.

Why were girls allowed to join these conventionally male activities? Moreover, why did Extension, whose national goal looked to “modernize” the countryside, allow women a fluidity that was much more aligned with rural traditions than urban? The answer to these questions lies in the roots of Iowa’s early 4-H organization. This club was born out of the connection to rural localities. Thus, 4-H’s early organizational structure, group policies, and even leadership background would reflect the values and social norms of rural America. Like the women of the farmstead, 4-H’s female members, leaders, and agents retained gender flexibility. It would not be till the early 1920s that a greater gender rigidity would be imposed. Ultimately, the ability of 4-H to adapt to rural gender standards only served to further its acceptance in Iowa’s countryside.

Outside of gender adaptability, 4-H was also able to succeed in the rural community because of its innate skill at adjusting to local conditions. Born out of the collective efforts of local educators and rural leaders, the early club always changed strategy to fit regional needs. This started well before 4-H was a statewide organization. When Jessie Field created a local “road grading” club to combat the terrible conditions in Page County, it proved to be popular with both adult and children because it

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<sup>161</sup> *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth 1:2*, Iowa State University Special Collections.

addressed a local need that many found pressing.<sup>162</sup> This adjustment to community needs continued in Page County even as 4-H became a larger association. A March 1920 report noted that Extension started a soybean club because of a prosperous local soybean company. The agent noted that this became easily marketed to community members, as the club's ability to supply youth members with small samples quickly expanded the group's membership.<sup>163</sup> This capacity for understanding regional mentality extended to other youth groups as well. Iowa's Van Buren County hosted a Spraying Club because of the successful local orchards.<sup>164</sup> Appanoose County's Extension used community breeders to supply livestock for their pig clubs, securing both the good will of the district and their capacity as 4-H contest judges.<sup>165</sup> This aptitude at addressing local needs ultimately allowed 4-H to become even more successful.

4-H's adaptable style becomes even more obvious when looking at other, less successful programs like the YMCA (and even other Extension programs). These groups failed to permeate the countryside because they lacked a connection to and an understanding of the desires of Iowa's rural communities. While the YMCA of the 1860s, 70s, and 80s provided safe urban housing to rural men, it had little contact with agrarian society. Very little of YMCA's core policies, including their focus on outdoor

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<sup>162</sup> Janice Nahra Friedal, "Jessie Field," *The Palimpsest*, 62:4, July/August 1981, 103, in *Jessie Field Papers* box 1, file 9, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>163</sup> Paul Taff, "Monthly Report to USDA Office in Washington D.C.," March 1920, 2, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth* 1:2, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>164</sup> Paul Taff, "Monthly Report to USDA Office in Washington D.C.," June 1920, 5, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth* 1:2, Iowa State University Special Collections.

<sup>165</sup> Paul Taff, "Monthly Report to USDA Office in Washington D.C.," May 1920, 6, in *Extension Work with Iowa Rural Youth* 1:2, Iowa State University Special Collections.

activity for children, matched rural values.<sup>166</sup> Given the organization's national goals and set traditions, the YMCA's failed to adapt to local desires, such as their lack of emphasis on rural education or activities. Because of this lack of focus, the rural program soon failed.

In the end, the interwar years of World War I provided a stable lifeline to Iowa's 4-H club. As the years progressed, both the influx of wealth into the rural community, and the passage of the Smith-Lever Act allowed 4-H to grow as a youth organization. However, the club's success within rural community went beyond simple funding. In order to successfully integrate itself to the rural community, 4-H needed to reflect the values of Iowa's agrarian society. Ultimately, the club's gender norms and innate adaptability allowed its acceptance. Wholly unique, 4-H continued to thrive in Iowa, even to this very day.

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<sup>166</sup> Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, *Childhood on the Farm*, (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2005), 1-35 and 185-197.

## CHAPTER 5

## CONCLUSION

As the World War One era slowly came to a close, rural Iowa began to change. With the end of the booming agricultural market in Europe, the golden age of agriculture came to a close. Throughout the country, many farmers began to experience the very beginnings of the Great Depression. This financial downturn clearly affected a changing 4-H club. By the early 1920s, fewer adults volunteered their time to help the club. Moreover, the end of the war also marked a huge decrease in federal funding for Extension. This caused a great reduction in paid positions and opportunities offered by 4-H, leading the club to lean more and more on volunteer labor and monetary contributions. Ultimately, this shift from federal funding to volunteerism powerfully influenced club standards and philosophy. This allowed 4-H to move from a small progressive idea to one of America's largest and long-lasting youth organizations.

In the end, 4-H was largely a product of rural America. Unlike other groups, progressive and governmental, 4-H succeeded because of its roots in Iowa's rural community. With the relocation of the countryside's youth population, anxiety permeated rural Iowa, leading many to search for a solution to this problem. People feared that the countryside would wither and die without the support of its youth, which might lead to an increase in food prices and a loss of traditional American values and morals. Out of this anxiety, rural progressivism was born. These men and women, both urban and rural, sought to harness the power of the country's progressive movement to change the countryside. They offered numerous suggestions for making rural life more

attractive to the fleeing youth, including adding new social opportunities for the young. Reformers presented agricultural contests, social clubs, and reformed rural education all as ways to slow the tide of depopulation. This movement grew so popular in fact, that it eventually made its way to the White House. Concerned about the conditions faced by rural Americans, Teddy Roosevelt formed the Country Life Commission, which aimed to uncover the problems facing the countryside. All of these attempts at reform help set the stage for 4-H.

Following the path laid out by these progressive reforms, 4-H grew from an idea to a small smattering of clubs around the state of Iowa. Starting with Captain E. Miller in Keokuk County, this “Educational Era” of 4-H would last till 1914. Educators created these early clubs largely in response to this anxiety, as they hoped these groups would fulfill the social needs of their students while instructing them in proper agricultural techniques. Although both Captain Miller and O.H. Benson (Superintendent of Wright County) remained instrumental to early 4-H, educator Jessie Field provided the critical step in 4-H as an organization. Field, as superintendent of Page County, was the first to contact Perry Holden, head of Iowa State’s budding Extension Program. This allowed local clubs all over the state of Iowa a chance to connect with one another.

The educational period of 4-H was also marked by general acceptance by the rural community. Whereas other youth programs failed in Iowa’s countryside, 4-H succeed for multiple reasons. Well-known leaders with backgrounds in the rural community openly endorsed it. Additionally, these early groups focused their attention on children, which was much less threatening than other reforms at this time. Finally,



local clubs also directly filled a need within the rural community. They provided a social opportunity for restless youth while educating them in agriculture. However, even as the club grew more popular in the state of Iowa, a major break was about to take place.

Worried over the growing power of Extension and influenced by urban school reformers, Iowa's Department of Public Instruction decreed that Extension was no longer allowed to instruct teachers. This effectively shut Extension out of the local clubs.

With the ruling of Iowa's department of Public Instruction in 1914, 4-H was suddenly cut adrift. Unable to reach its members and local leaders, Extension's youth club seemed doomed to fail. Luckily for 4-H, Congress also passed the Smith-Lever Act in 1914, nationalizing the Extension Service and providing a plethora of funding to the club. This allowed 4-H to create a more stable organization with a clear chain of command. Furthermore, with the Great War in Europe also starting, rural wealth in America reached an all time high. This increase coupled with the additional funding and boost in nationalism allowed 4-H a chance to integrate itself more fully in the rural community. But this war was not the only reason the club was able to succeed. Ultimately, 4-H thrived because it reflect the values of Iowa's rural community, including agrarian gender roles and the ability to adapt.

Even with the examination of 4-H's extension records as well as the Field and Taff collections, many questions still linger. Although these records offer historians tantalizing glimpses of 4-H's gradual acceptance into the rural community, they do not tell a complete story. Most notably missing are the opinions of 4-H's youthful members. While this thesis examined the remembrances and brief stories from of several children,

most of the records depend on adult views. What did children think about this club? Was it viewed as a social opportunity? Did the members actually like what they did and feel that they learned something?

Another major piece of the story missing are opinions by people who resisted 4-H's spread in the rural community. Did some members of the rural community view the club only as a fad, something that would fade as time went on? Did parents see the club as an usurper, an organization that stole educational authority from mothers and fathers? In addition, although some Extension records discussed 4-H's split with Iowa's school system, remarkably few Department of Public Instruction records offer the same candor. In fact, neither the State Superintendent Annual Reports nor the letters to the Superintendent offer any record of the split. Because of this lack of information, much the analysis on this break is pointedly one-sided.

Although ignored by most scholars, 4-H represents a unique opportunity for continued studied of America's past. The origin of 4-H stands at a crossroads in rural history, as America's population slowly drifted towards urban living. This club, like many other movements, was a response to rural anxiety. However, 4-H remained unique in many of its aspects. It was a youth club that targeted agrarian children rather than their urban counterparts. It was a major part of America's Extension Service, but unlike many other programs, 4-H is still well-known and popular today. And most of all, it continues to flourish. While other major progressive, governmental, and youth groups have failed in the past, this small rural idea grew into a large organization still operating today. With 6.5 million members and 60 million alumni, 4-H will continue to make the best better.

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