

County fair celebrates 4-H's 100th

By Pam Chickering Wilson, Union staff writer | Posted: Wednesday, July 9, 2014 9:53 am

JEFFERSON — The Jefferson County Fair is celebrating a century of 4-H in Wisconsin as the 162nd annual event takes place today through Sunday.

The 4-H program is rooted in “The Wisconsin Idea,” a philosophy embraced by the University of Wisconsin System, holds that research conducted within the system should be applied to solve problems for all citizens of the state, thus improving state residents’ health, quality of life, agriculture and environment.

The “Wisconsin Idea” was established in 1904, when then-UW President Charles Van Hise declared that he would “never be content until the beneficent influence of the university reaches every family in the state.”

Van Hise and Governor Robert LaFollette defined a third mission to add to the teaching and research functions on the University of Wisconsin. This mission, the UW-Extension, would spread the resources of the university to serve the needs of Wisconsin residents. The Extension provides education for people where they live and work, with practical applications to their daily lives.

Thus even the “common people” who might not be able to afford college would have access to the best and latest information to help in their homes and on their farms.

Nationally, the Smith Lever Act of 1914 funded and codified into federal law land grant universities, with one extension agent serving all areas. (Now there are multiple extension agents in each county, of which the 4-H/youth development agent is one.)

But the people who initially implemented these extension programs found that many adults already were set in their ways and were reluctant to try out new, research-based planting methods or safer canning methods.

So the Extension turned its attention to young people as well, getting boys involved in corn-planting clubs and girls interested in canning clubs. And lo and behold, the boys planting corn using the new, research-backed methods saw greater yields than their fathers, and the girls produced canned goods with a much longer shelf life than their mothers’.

The Wisconsin 4-H program got its start roughly 100 years ago. At one time, the organization was actually “3-H,” the letters standing for head, heart and hands. The fourth “H,” standing for “health,” was added later.

The 4-H Pledge states, “I pledge my head to clearer thinking, my heart to greater loyalty, my hands to larger



CENTURY OF 4-H

CENTURY OF 4-H — Wisconsin’s 4-H clubs are celebrating the 100th anniversary of their founding this year. Pictured above, Sarah Torbert, Jefferson County's University of Wisconsin-Extension 4-H/youth development agent, and summer UW-Extension 4-H intern Kamilla Thoma display a banner celebrating the century milestone.

service, my health to better living, for my club, my community, my country and my world.”

The youth education organization has evolved a great deal since the early days. It no longer focuses exclusively on agriculture and homemaking skills, but, rather, has branched out to serve a broad array of interests.

Sarah Torbert, a Watertown native who took over as Jefferson County 4-H Youth development agent this year, said the Jefferson County area has a strong 4-H tradition, and the opportunities are expanding.

“It’s so much more than what their parents and grandparents had exposure to,” she said. “There are so many options.”

One of the misconceptions about 4-H is that it’s a program only for rural youth, people who live on farms and raise crops or animals. In fact, nonfarm youth also are welcome to join, whether they pursue more traditional activities such as quilting, pickling and raising animals or less-traditional activities such as computers, photography, rocketry and robotics.

“We don’t need to educate kids on proper canning anymore,” Torbert said, although she noted that making preserves and canning actually have seen a resurgence in recent years due to interest in locally-grown food and homesteading. “We’re here to meet the needs of the kids we serve, from shooting sports to arts and crafts to leadership development.”

Jefferson County has around 800 4-H members right now, many of whom are involved in numerous projects. Most popular is the photography project, with some 1,200 youth photo exhibits entered in the Jefferson County Fair this year.

Newer projects include shooting sports, robotics (with locals taking top honors at the state fair in the past couple of years), Lego building and more technology-based projects.

“STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) is a huge push going into the future,” Torbert said. “We want to teach young people skills they can use in their lives.”

Jefferson County has around 30 4-H clubs, some little and some very large. Some specialize in a specific area, such as the “Lovely Llamas” or “Stable Stompers,” but most are all-around clubs involved in a wide variety of projects.

The Farmington All-Stars currently is the biggest club with around 90 members.

Many of the clubs have been in existence for numerous decades. Some clubs have been discontinued over the years, such as the Jefferson Peppers and the Grellton Go-Getters, but others have arisen elsewhere. In fact, the county welcomed a new club just this year: the Lake Mills Legendaries.

Early records are spotty, but the Hubbleton Hustlers is among the oldest clubs. The club’s own history states that it began around 1929, with boys and girls meeting separately each month at members’ homes. The club did not meet during the winter. Girls in the sewing project made dresser scarves adorned with the 4-H logo and boys raised calves and garden plants.

Family names dominant in the club over the years included the Holzhueters, Schadts, Raatzes and Holtermans, among many others.

When one of the Holzhueter sons passed away, Torbert said, the family donated all of the money he had raised from selling pigs over the years toward improvements at Jefferson County Fair Park.

One thing that has remained the same is the multi-age and intergenerational aspect of the organization.

Torbert said 4-H is different than other youth organizations because it truly involves the entire family. Youngsters of all ages are in the same club, breaking out into areas of interest, and there are a lot of opportunities for involvement and leadership for parents and older youth.

“It’s not every club where your 5-year-old and your 18-year-old can all attend together,” she said. “The idea is that every person in the family can find something they enjoy doing through 4-H.”

Watching the older youth take leadership roles provides a great example for the younger members, as well. Torbert said that Jefferson County is fortunate to have a lot of young adults just out of college who have returned to 4-H in a leadership role, such as Lindsay Knoebel, now the county meats team coach, and Stephanie (Schadt) Zimmerman, who grew up in the goat project and now serves on the goat committee.

Community volunteers also are incredibly important, with some people remaining involved long after their own children have grown up.

“We have always relied on volunteers, from parent involvement to general leaders to project leaders,” Torbert said. “In the past, there were more regular project meetings, while now project leaders serve more as resource leaders, but volunteers are still incredibly important. There’s no way we could do all of this without them.”

For example, Cindy Jaquith, whose children now are all grown, remains involved in 4-H as project leader for the Stone School 4-H Club and the swine representative on the Meat Animal Project Committee.

From the beginning, younger siblings often accompanied 4-H members to meetings and activities. Perhaps that’s one contributing factor that led to the establishment of the Cloverbud program in the early 1990s for kindergartners through second-graders.

The younger 4-Hers do age-appropriate activities and participate in projects on an exploratory level, and their fair entries do not receive placing ribbons but, rather, get a Cloverbud ribbon. Nor do they sit through formal judging sessions with adult judges; rather, they talk about their project with an older youth volunteering through the Junior Leaders program.

The organization offers educational opportunities in countless areas through individual projects from creative writing to self-directed projects to beekeeping.

In addition, 4-H club activities always have had three aspects: community service, fundraising and recreation.

“What they’ve done has changed over the years, but these aspects have been constant,” Torbert said.

Sports leagues, once a big part of the 4-H experience, were discontinued within the last decade, as children became busy with school sports and other activities and the pool of adult volunteers dried up.

The Jefferson County 4-H program has long had a newsletter, formerly named the “Jefferson County 4-H Bugle.” Once mimeographed, hand-stapled booklet that included jokes and other ditties along with club news and

announcements, it today has moved online and includes full-color pictures.

Local 4-Hers have been involved in different leadership opportunities through the years. The National Congress and Citizen Washington Focus have taken place now for more than 50 years, with the same focus, although the trip is different. For instance, now participants stay in hotels rather than camping out in tents on the National Mall.

International 4-H Youth Exchange has been in existence for many years and Jefferson County continues to send representatives, with Erin Walsh of Johnson Creek representing the local area this summer in Japan.

“I heard from a lady who participated in IFYE many years ago and went to India,” Torbert said. “She had to ride a boat for 36 days to get there. Now people just fly.”

The county fair still exists, as it always has, for young people to showcase their best work — whether it’s an animal they have raised and trained, a craft they made or an explanatory poster or display about a subject they’ve researched.

However, fair judging has changed in recent years. Torbert said that the Jefferson County Fair used to judge everything by the Danish method, in which every entry was ranked according to a prescribed number of blue, red, white and pink ribbons, regardless of the quality of the field of entries.

Now, 4-H entries are judged face-to-face, taking into account youngsters’ knowledge of the subject, as well as the quality of that specific entry.

And they’re judged according to a set standard, so if eight tomatoes are entered in the same class and they’re all of superior quality, it’s possible that all would receive blue ribbons.

If the contrary were true, it’s possible a field of entries would receive no blue ribbons at all.

But whatever the judging method, fair remains the high point of the 4-H year for most participants. It’s intense, hectic and punctuated by tense moments as when a huge pig led by an 8-year-old heads the wrong way in the ring.

But for many, it also represents around-the-clock fun, from naps in the barn to evenings with friends from the other side of the county, to the traditional water fight in the livestock-washing area at the end of the fair week.

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