

How 4-H Began

What is now 4-H began at the start of the 20th century, when boys' and girls' agriculture clubs formed in many places across the country. These early efforts occurred in rural schools or at farmers' institutes organized by agricultural colleges to demonstrate the latest scientific information. Some of the first states to become involved were New York, Ohio, Texas, Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois, and Oregon.

In Oregon in 1904, L.R. Alderman, then Yamhill County school superintendent and later Oregon superintendent of public instruction, established a children's fair with programs in gardening, cooking, woodworking, raising farm animals, and other activities. Alderman and H.C. Seymour, Polk County school superintendent, expanded the idea, and by 1910, both counties had organized boys' and girls' industrial clubs. In 1913, the Oregon legislature appropriated funds for introducing boys' and girls' industrial clubs statewide under the state superintendent of public instruction.

In 1914, Congress passed the Smith-Lever Act, formally establishing Extension work on a cooperative basis among the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the state land-grant colleges, and counties in each state. Funds were included for youth programs, which became known as 4-H in 1924.

After Smith-Lever funds became available, the OSU Extension Service was given the responsibility for club work under an agreement with the state Department of Education. At that time, boys' and girls' industrial clubs were reorganized

to be similar to 4-H in other states. Boys and girls enrolled in projects on corn growing, potato growing, vegetables, poultry, pigs, dairy herd record keeping, sewing, cooking, canning, and woodworking.

Unlike most states, Oregon made 4-H available to city and rural youth from the early days. In fact, Portland is widely regarded as the first major city in the nation to have 4-H clubs; these clubs were formed under an agreement between OSU Extension and the Portland School District in 1920.

Through the 1930s, Oregon 4-H was closely allied with public schools. As late as 1948, many school superintendents were actively involved in organizing 4-H clubs, and teachers provided the primary adult leadership. As schools consolidated, enrollment increased, and larger districts formed, 4-H shifted to community-oriented clubs led by parents and other adult volunteers.

During World War II, 4-H members helped grow victory gardens in support of the troops abroad. In the 1960s and 1970s, 4-H expanded to the cities and suburbs; those decades also marked the beginning of global education and international exchange programs in 4-H.

Today, 4-H emphasizes nutrition and healthy living, civic engagement, sustainability, and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) education while maintaining support for traditional project areas, such as animal science, food, and horticulture.

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