

This research paper was written as background information for the creation of the 2005 "Winning the Prairie Gamble" exhibits at the WDM and is copyright of the Western Development Museum.

**“Learning to Do by Doing:”
Farm Boys’ and Girls’ Clubs
in Saskatchewan during the 1920s**

**Prepared for
Saskatchewan Western Development Museum’s
“Winning the Prairie Gamble” 2005 Exhibit**

by Joan Champ
March 12, 2003

**“Learning to Do by Doing:”
Farm Boys’ and Girls’ Clubs
in Saskatchewan during the 1920s**

1. Boys’ and Girls’ Clubs

In Saskatchewan, the Boys’ and Girls’ Club movement began in the schools during the early 1900s. Fostered by the Department of Education, over 2,600 children participated in school garden competitions in 1912. Responsibilities for the administration of the youth club programs alternated between the Department of Education and the Department of Agriculture for several years, before the program was turned over to the University of Saskatchewan’s Extension Department in 1920. The purpose of the Boys’ and Girls’ Clubs was “to provide opportunity for full expression of the natural talents of the boys and girls under direction that will foster their expression to life’s highest fulfilment.”¹(Saskatoon: L.C. Paul, 1979), 95.

The first Farm Girls’ Convention for girls of fifteen to twenty years of age was held in 1917 at the University of Saskatchewan. In 1936, Saskatchewan formed the first Girls’ Homecraft Clubs in Canada.

Swine, sheep, beef and grain clubs were organized throughout the province in the 1920s. Great stress was placed on winning competitions, and eventually the most highly prized award was the trip to the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair in Toronto. In 1924, two Saskatchewan boys, Everett Lunan and Raymond Neefs, were sent by the province to the first national contests held at the Toronto Royal; they were sponsored by the CNR.

While social and recreational programs were essential features of the programs, the Boys’ and Girls’ Clubs had great educational value, stimulating improvements in the quality of agricultural and domestic life on Saskatchewan’s farms.

Girls and boys from rural Saskatchewan who participated in judging competitions went on to become competent judges at fairs and exhibitions. Many of the calves and yearlings shown by young people at local fairs later competed for provincial honours at Saskatchewan winter fairs. Grant MacEwan recalls that the “gigantic and historic calf feeding enterprise at Saskatoon in 1928-29 [was] ...the biggest thing of its kind seen in Canada and perhaps in the world.” In the autumn of 1928, the Saskatoon Exhibition, in co-operation with the Saskatoon Board of Trade, distributed 1,160 calves to eager boys and girls. “Seven months later, on June 14th and 15th, 1929, over 1,000 of these calves were returned for a monster Fat Stock Show at Saskatoon by about 400 youthful exhibitors to qualify for over \$5,000 in prizes,” MacEwan writes.² As Red

¹L.C. Paul, *Extension at the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, 1910-70; A History*.

²Grant MacEwan, “There’ve Been Great Changes in Fifty Years of Beef Cattle,” in *Farm and*

Williams explains, the junior club movement was of “fundamental significance to the development of the beef industry in Saskatchewan.” Club members, or parents attending events with their children, became aware of trends in the industry, leading to improvements in cattle production.³ The two branches of junior club work – Boys’ and Girls’ Clubs and Homecraft Clubs – both became part of the 4-H movement in 1952.

2. Farm Boys’ and Farm Girls’ Camps

The first Farm Boys’ Camp in Saskatchewan was held in 1915. The Saskatchewan Department of Agriculture, in co-operation with the Regina Exhibition Board, sponsored the event. Their goal was to repair a “deficiency of rural life” where “the average country boy in Saskatchewan is lacking in interest and social intercourse with other boys.”⁴ The camps were funded by a donation of \$1,000 from the Canadian Credit Men’s Trust Association of Winnipeg. Each boy paid an entry fee of \$1.25, and special railway fares were procured to help reduce expenses.

Between 1915 and 1939, 137 camps were held, with an average attendance of 110 boys. In 1920, the first Saskatoon camp was held, with 175 boys involved in seed grain judging, crop judging and weed identification. In subsequent years, camps were also conducted in North Battleford, Yorkton, Prince Albert, Melfort, Estevan, Moose Jaw, Weyburn, and Lloydminster. These camps were considered educational holidays. “How else could one in the early years expect to spend two to four days at a place many miles from home in the company of other kids their age; attend banquets, eat at cafes, and meet important people in the province and university,” Jack Bradik of Speers later recalled. “It was a real eye opener to us ‘country kids’.”⁵

In 1916, the Agricultural Secretaries of the province expressed their opinion to the Minister of Agriculture that “the most important work now being undertaken by us is the work among boys and girls.” Through children, the secretaries stated, the parents could be most effectively reached, effecting a “revolution” in farm practices within a relatively short period of time.⁶

In 1925, Douglas Cox, winner of Bank of Commerce Cup at Regina and \$75 scholarship, wrote:

Ranch Review (February 1955), 17.

³C.M. (Red) Williams, “Always the Bridesmaid: The Development of the Saskatchewan Beef Production System, Part Two: Historical Highlights and Integral Factors,” in *Saskatchewan History* (Vol. XLIV, No. 2, Spring 1992), 73.

⁴Saskatchewan Archives Board (SAB), Papers of the Saskatchewan Department of Agriculture, Deputy Minister, R-261.1, file 21.2, “Farm Boys’ Camp, 1915-26,” “Farm Boys’ Camp, Regina,” [1915].

⁵Jack Bradik, “Farm Camps,” in *Along the Carlton Trail; A History of Speers...* (The Ottawa-Speers History Book Committee, n.d.), 61.

⁶SAB, R-261.1, file 21.2, letter to the Minister of Agriculture from Agricultural Secretaries, July 26, 1916.

... I think the camp is one of the best movements for the future of our Province of Saskatchewan that its people have ever inaugurated. ... One important feature attaching to the camps is that no expense on the part of the boys is incurred. Thus, an equal chance is offered to anyone in poor circumstances, as well as to others, to join in the movement for better farming. ... For my part, I am sure that boys attending it learn more in the allotted time of three days than they would in three months on the average farm. This may easily be realised when it is remembered that a boy who views the exhibits sees before him some of the best farm products available and, consequently, knows the standard which he should try to attain with his own products.⁷

The first Farm Girls' Camp was held at Melfort in 1929, with 29 girls present. An effort had been made in 1916 to include a Girls' Camp at the Regina Exhibition Boys' Camp, however cost considerations – the girls would require more comfortable quarters than the boys – seem to have prevented this from happening.⁸ After 1929, the girls' camps, which lasted one week, were mainly sponsored by Homemakers' Clubs.

⁷Douglas Cox, as quoted in "Farm Boys' Camps Exceed All Expectations," in *Public Service Monthly* (Nov. 1925), 6-7.

⁸SAB, R-261.1, file 21.2, "Memo Re Boys and Girls Work for the Year 1916."

Bibliography

Primary Sources

The Country Guide:

1. "The Farm Goes to the University," Feb 1945, 9, 24.
2. "Youth Clubs — A Chronology," September 1955, 25.

Farm and Ranch Review:

3. MacEwan, Grant, "There've Been Great Changes in Fifty Years of Beef Cattle," February 1955, 17.

Public Service Monthly:

4. "Boys' and Girls' Club Work Increases Fast," July 1921, 11-13.
5. "Boys' and Girls' Training in Live Stock Work is Described," May 1926, 12.
6. "Farm Boys' Camps Exceed All Expectations," Nov. 1925, 6-7.
7. "Farm Boys' Camp Will Again be a Feature of Fairs," May 1921, 15.
8. "Farm Girls Will Hold Convention in Month of May," May 1926, 12.

Saskatchewan Archives Board (SAB):

9. Papers of the Saskatchewan Department of Agriculture, Deputy Minister, R-261.1.

Secondary Sources

60 Years of 4-H in Saskatchewan, 1917-1977, compiled and edited by Beatrice Magee, Dorothy Burnett and Patricia Katz, [1977?].

Bradik, Jack, "Farm Camps," in *Along the Carlton Trail; A History of Speers...* The Ottawa-Speers History Book Committee, n.d., 61-2.

Cowan, A.R., "Saskatchewan Farm Boys' Camp (1922)," in *Autumn Leaves, Gilded Sheaves: A Legacy; Carievale & District*, Carievale History Book Committee, 1988.

Paul, L.C., *Extension at the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, 1910-70; A History*. Saskatoon: L.C. Paul, 1979.

Williams, C.M. (Red), "Always the Bridesmaid: The Development of the Saskatchewan Beef Production System, Part Two: Historical Highlights and Integral Factors," in *Saskatchewan History*, Vol.XLIV, No. 2, Spring 1992.

Appendix A: Boys' and Girls' Clubs (4-H) Timeline

- 1909 - First school exhibition in Saskatchewan
- 1911 - First organized competition for farm youth in Saskatchewan through the schools, jointly sponsored by the C.N.R. and the University of Saskatchewan. Wheat judging.
- 1912 - School garden competitions and school fairs fostered by the Saskatchewan Department of Education. Several agricultural societies in the province hold livestock judging competitions for boys and girls.
- 1913 - First official Boys' and Girls' Club originated in Roland, Manitoba
- 1915 - First Farm Boys' Camp in Canada held in Saskatchewan at Regina Summer Exhibition.
- 1916 - First Farm Girls' Convention held at the university in Saskatoon
- 1918 - Saskatchewan Boys' and Girls' Clubs organized on a provincial basis.
- 1919 - Boys' and Girls' Club projects in Saskatchewan operated through the schools.
- 1920 - Boys' and Girls' Club programs were transferred from the Department of Education to the Agricultural Extension Department of the University of Saskatchewan
- 1920 - Bryant Public Speaking contests were begun, offering another opportunity for self-improvement to rural youth.
- 1922 - Saskatchewan's first team livestock judging competition for three boys and girls held at the Livestock Convention, Regina.
- 1924 - Eleven Boys' and Girls' Swine Clubs organized in Saskatchewan. Two boys, Everett Lunan and Raymond Neefs sent by the province to the first national contests held at the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair, sponsored by the CNR.
- 1925 - Two swine clubs went to the Royal and took part in the first interprovincial competition at the national level
- 1929 - First Farm Girls Camp in Melfort (29 girls participated). Sheep clubs formed in Saskatchewan.
- 1930 - Beef and grain clubs started in Saskatchewan.
- 1931 - Canadian Council of Boys' and Girls' Clubs organized to direct youth club work across the country.
- 1933 - Saskatchewan hosted the World's Grain Show and Conference at Regina. A three-member youth team won the World's Grain Judging Competition.
- 1934 - Poultry clubs added to the list of youth projects in Saskatchewan.
- 1935 - Melfort Farm Girls Camp had 222 participants.
- 1936 - Saskatchewan formed the first Girls' Homecraft Clubs.
- 1938 - Foal clubs began in Saskatchewan.
- 1942 - Dairy clubs in Saskatchewan came under the direction of the U of S Extension Dept.
- 1952 - Boys' and Girls' Clubs across Canada change their names to "4-H Clubs." 4-H in Saskatchewan is unique in that the program is organized under the Co-operative Extension Program (involving the Extension Division of the University of Saskatchewan; the Saskatchewan Department of Agriculture and the Canadian Department of Agriculture). In all other provinces, government departments alone administer the 4-H program.