



THE EARLY HISTORY OF WISCONSIN 4-H

By: William E. Gleason

Portions by: R.V. Greago, Franklin M. Reck and Mark Mastalir - Dunn County 4-H Youth Development Agent

An Overview of the Life and Contributions of Ransom Asa Moore, 1861-1941

The Seth Moore family migrated from the East to Racine County in the 1850's and finally on to Kewaunee with the opening of new lands to homestead. Ransom, born in 1861, grew up in the wilds of the area with very little schooling. In his later childhood and teen years, he attended two to three weeks of formal school each winter. He became responsible to tend the fires at the lime kilns owned by his father at night and became a voracious reader of everything in print he could get his hands on to pass the time. The light of the fires in the lime kilns was dim but served as his reading lamp. At the age of twenty-one, a back injury from an accident at the kilns made it clear he could forget farming and physical labor as a career. A friend suggested teaching; he took the test, passed and became a teacher in rural ungraded schools in 1882. He later attended Oshkosh Normal for six months.

In 1889, he was elected County Superintendent of Schools. In 1892, the people expressed concern with poor quality and lack of quantity of agricultural products other than horses at the county fair. The county board requested he consider what could be done to change this. He called on his teachers to encourage students to grow and make things to exhibit at the fair. He called his clubs in Kewaunee County the "Young People's Contest Clubs" which produced exhibits from every school in the county. In 1891, he had 6000 pupils enrolled in the work which changed the fair into a successful operation. The local papers in 1893, 1894, and 1895, raved about the improved quality of the fair exhibits. This fact and his correspondence with UW President Chamberlin, recommending students to the University, resulted in Dean William A. Henry (UW College of Agriculture, established 1889, Henry appointed first dean in 1892) recruiting Moore to take charge of the school's short course which had begun in 1885 but never really had gotten established. Moore began this work in December 1895. He toiled about by bicycle, horse and train, recruited students and the agricultural short course success was assured.

In 1897 he requested time to visit Professor Hays at the University of Minnesota, who was perfecting a new seed selection process for the improvement of varieties and strains in field crops, fruits, and vegetables. This was to become the central focus for the remainder of Moore's career.

The beginning of what was to become 4-H in Wisconsin was initiated in the fall of 1903. Ransom Asa Moore, son of wilderness settlers in Kewaunee, stocky, black haired, snapping dark eyes, farmer, lime kiln operator, rural school teacher, county Superintendent of Schools and now Professor in the College of Agriculture at UW Madison had another idea. Involve farm youth in growing small plots of improved grain varieties on the home farm to demonstrate to parents the potential economic advantage from growing improved crop strains was the idea. Always warm, talkative, super enthusiastic and a friend to rural youth, Moore sold the idea to R. H. Burns, Richland County Superintendent of Schools and J. W. Martin, Red Polled breeder, Chicago Stock Show Director and president of the Richland County Fair Association. W. H. Pier, a local banker would offer cash prizes. A Rock Island planter and an Eagle Claw walking cultivator together worth 40 dollars would be first prize. The contest was open to farm boys under 20 years of age. In the spring of 1904, they were given seed packets and encouraged to follow the growing instructions provided. Grain from their plots could be entered in the "Great Youth Corn Growing contest" to be held at the Richland County Fairgrounds from September 27 to 30, 1904.

In promotion for the contest, the Richland Republican Observer promised; "Professor Moore will give a corn talk before the grandstand and Professor Kleinheing will show some of his prize winning sheep from the University with a lecture on shearing and trimming." A special train carried 150 people from Madison to participate in the event.

With his usual superlatives, Moore was quoted as believing the 50 Richland fair corn entries were the "best he ever saw." He gave top four places to Ralph Harter, Gotham; C. E. Welson, Sextonsville; Irvin McDowell and John Turgason, Richland. The newspaper claimed that the corn boys attracted more attention than Big Otto's trained monkeys and a black ragtime band.

There were reasons for this fast-awakening interest in rural boys and girls. The time from 1900 to 1910 was a period of rising farm prices, and therefore one of growing rural prosperity. Farmers were not only making more money, they were emerging from frontier isolation. Mail was now coming to them by rural free delivery. The crank telephone, hanging on the hallway wall, was becoming more and more common. Electric interurbans, here and there, were growing farmers closer to the city, picking up their milk and delivering their mail orders. The years following 1900 marked the beginning of the horseless carriage age and the great campaign to pull rural America out of the mud.

All of these factors aroused in farm people a growing discontent. They began to dream of some better fate than a lonely, unrewarding life of hard work. Comparing themselves to city folks, they too wanted better clothes, plumbing, home decorations, proper diets for their children, and a host of other things that improved communications brought into their orbit.

Nowhere was this dissatisfaction more keenly felt than in the one-room rural school. Farmers were beginning to realize that the small schools for which they paid taxes were not conditioning their children for life on the farm but leading them away from it.

Children attending rural schools in 1900 learned little about plants, farm animals, or domestic science. They learned the traditional three R's - readin', 'ritin', and 'rithmetic - and little else. The examples in their arithmetic text dealt with banking rather than farm accounting. The tales of success in their readers were of city men. And these subjects were taught for the most part by town-trained ladies whose dress, manners and way of talking reflected their town upbringing.

By 1910 fully \$16,000 in prizes had been offered for corn growing contests at 45 fairs. Professor Moore decided that scholarships to attend the young folks' course at the college would be of much more permanent value. In 1909, 25 boys attended and in 1910, 44 girls came along.

The movement succeeded beyond expectation and word spread. Boys and girls Crop Growing Contests became very popular. County, regional and statewide comparison judging competitions evolved. The idea spread, applying the same principles, to animal care and growing, food preservation and preparation, sewing, etc.

By 1910, the movement had become so successful that Moore was permitted to hire an assistant for this youth work. Thomas L. Bewick, a promising young agronomy instructor at UW and former teacher of high school agriculture, was hired as his assistant and when the Smith Lever Act of 1914 was passed by the U. S. Congress, establishing the Cooperative Extension Service, Bewick was named as the first State 4-H Leader for Wisconsin. He served in this role for 40 years.

In the early 1920's, Bewick stated that "Boys and girls club work has based its line of development on four fundamental principles. They are:

- First, a business operation. Each member must take some farm or home project and treat it in a businesslike way.
- Second, it must be educational. No boy or girl should enter a project without making a thorough and complete study and become familiar with the most up-to-date and profitable practices.
- Third, having fun or a good time, to build into their daily lives the happiest disposition it is possible to make.
- Fourth, service to their community and their country, to humanity. They owe to their parents, the community and their country the best possible service they are able to render.

While similar work was beginning in many other states, Wisconsin, due to Ransom Asa Moore's work, was certainly among the leaders. He has thus deservedly become known as the "Father of Wisconsin 4-H," a program which now involves over 150,000 youth, 28,000 volunteer leaders, and over 90 paid staff.

"Club work began wherever a public-spirited man or woman did something to give rural boys and girls respect for themselves and their way of live. Wherever leaders gave the stamp of public recognition to youthful achievements on farm and in home, there club work began."

Franklin M. Reck



An EEO/AA employer, University of Wisconsin-Extension provides equal opportunities in employment and programming, including Title IX and American with Disabilities (ADA) requirements. © 2004 by the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. Developed by the Wisconsin 4-H Office, 431 Lowell Hall, 610 Langdon St., Madison, WI 53703. The 4-H name and emblem are federally protected under Title 18 US Code 707.