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## **The Future of Farming in Capable and Small Hands: The Young Farmer's Movement in Waterloo Region 1907-1924**

**Morgan Williams**

**A**t the turn of the twentieth century, Canadian agricultural practices changed along with the arrival of new technologies, increased global commerce, and a sentiment for progress. In order to keep the agricultural sector competitive, Canada was forced to maintain pace with these changes. One of the ways that Ontario's Agricultural Department achieved this was by organizing rural youth into young farmer's clubs in order to promote new farming ideas. Agricultural clubs, such as 4-H, the Junior Farmer's Association, and the Farmer's Institutes, were important vehicles to encourage higher grades of produce and livestock as well as progressive farming practices and technologies. These clubs were fundamentally the same in kind, but had different names depending on the year and location. Most agricultural clubs were organized at the school level and instructed students in new farming techniques, and then gave them small projects so they could practice what they had learned. These clubs were also instrumental as extracurricular forms of education that provided leadership training in the form of public speaking and debate instruction. Such opportunities for practical farming education and public speaking lessons were intended to strengthen rural youths' sense of confidence and interest in not only the future of farming, but community involvement as well.

Youth were an important catalyst for change in Ontario's farming practices because they were impressionable and thus more easily influenced by government officials and teachers. This article will argue that the young farmer's movement was important to Waterloo Region's agricultural development because it inspired young children to take an interest in farming and aided in the modernization of agricultural processes. The effects of these early efforts can be seen across Canada today as it continues to implement innovative farming initiatives and retains its position as a world leader in the agricultural sector (Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada). Moreover, the sense of community in small rural areas was strengthened by young farmer's clubs, which connected to life at school and home. This article will examine club publications between 1907 and 1924, focusing on the objectives and implementation of club programs. The first Agricultural Representatives were sent out to Ontario counties in 1907, signalling the beginning of rural agricultural

education classes and school fairs that would spark the growth of the young farmer's movement. In 1924, the railways sponsored 4-H clubs, and thus the clubs grew dramatically. These events defined a new era in young farming groups.

The phrase 'young farmer's movement' was used to encapsulate a growing trend of youth interest in farming not only in Waterloo, but also across the Western world. One of these clubs still exists in Canada today – the 4-H club. The 4-H club is a group for youth that offers opportunities to learn agriculture-oriented skills. Children are given the chance to test their newly acquired skills in the form of a personal project. 4-H clubs were not the first examples of young farmer's clubs in Canada, but are important because they survive today and were widespread (especially after the 1920s). The first 4-H clubs appear to have started in the United States. In Canada, the first 4-H club was created in Roland, Manitoba in 1913; the club quickly spread across the country with the help of Agricultural Departments ("4-H Clubs" 13). Government involvement was important to the rise and sustainability of clubs such as the 4-H and the Junior Farmer's Institutes. In Ontario, the Department of Agriculture sent out six recent graduates of the Ontario Agricultural College to counties across the province in 1907. The representatives taught agricultural classes in high schools, organized school fairs, and took on secretary and supervisor positions in Junior Farmer's Associations. The government's role in these early clubs was to provide leadership through Agricultural Representatives. Ontario's provincial government also provided resources for these clubs such as pamphlets, instructional material, and seeds for school fairs.

The history of young farmer's clubs has been documented in several club publications. Various national and provincial histories produced by these organizations provide historical background to the clubs. This article differs from those sources because it concentrates on Waterloo Region and offers a third party perspective. In addition, other historians have written on the subject of children and farming in Canada. In her book *Heavy Burdens on Small Shoulders*, Sandra Rollings-Magnusson argues that children played an important role in running farms in the Canadian prairies. In *Fashioning Farmers*, Jeffery Taylor discusses rural schools in Manitoba and the role of agricultural classes and clubs. Neil Sutherland also discusses changes in education in his book *Children in English-Canadian Society*. In particular, Sutherland outlines the clashes between conservative thinking and educational reform. Sharon Wall's book *The Nature of Nurture* discusses the growth of summer camps in Ontario. *The Nature of Nurture* is relevant to this study because it offers a cultural analysis of early twentieth century anti-modernism and the appreciation of rural areas and nature. These books support the position of this article, namely that youth have been an integral part of agricultural development and the running of farms.

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The main source of evidence for this article is club publications, including both club histories and primary documents. The stories from *I Want to Join your Club* and the diary of Will Barrie will be used as evidence from youth themselves to support the analysis of club documents. The sources examined in this article reveal the objectives of the government and leaders of agricultural groups, and shed light on how effectively their objectives were accomplished. It must be remembered that these sources are, for the most part, the opinions of adults regarding youth groups and activities. In many cases, these documents are intended to celebrate the clubs' history, and thus they typically stress positive aspects of the clubs. This being said, several of the club publications mention their shaky beginnings, including discussions of low enrolment rates during the First World War and heavy dependence on government support.

The climate of international affairs is important for understanding Ontario's motivation to pursue an aggressive agricultural policy. In the decade following the turn of the twentieth century, the provincial government was strongly convinced that Ontario farms needed to cater more towards British markets. One reason for this decision was the McKinley Tariff of 1870, which virtually shut off the American market to Canadian farmers (Biesenthal 15). Farmers also had to meet demands of the rising urban population in Ontario; for the first time, Ontario was seeing large urban populations demanding food. The urbanites, along with the British market, came with preferences for higher quality butter, lean pork, and well-finished beef (Biesenthal 16). It was under these demands that government officials felt an increasing pressure to ensure that farms met the needs of Ontario. As will be discussed, Ontario's youth proved to be an effective vehicle for initiating agricultural reform.

To understand the importance of such clubs, what they did and how they operated must first be explained. One of the most important aspects of these young farmer's clubs was the school fair. School fairs were the culmination of youths' work in growing produce or raising livestock. The provincial government often provided young girls and boys with seed or chicken eggs and instructions on how to tend to them; children were told to keep a record of their work throughout the year. The end project would then be displayed at the school fair and prizes would be given out for the strongest submission in each category. For older farming boys, the Junior Farmer's Association and the Farmer's Institute offered different opportunities. These boys took classes in agriculture and later formed clubs that would hold annual meetings to discuss the latest in farming technology and occasionally go on outings to experimental farms. Young members of these clubs would experiment with better quality seed and livestock and report their results. These activities were arranged by age and gender. School-aged children would participate in school fairs. Boys and girls' agri-

cultural clubs were organized for 12 to 18 year olds and Junior Farmer's Improvement Associations were organized for men between the ages of 16 and 30 (Biesenthal 55).

The origin of school fairs and later clubs can be traced back to the appointment of District Agricultural Representatives that were dispersed across Ontario. The first representative for Waterloo was Frank C. Hart who served from 1907 to 1914 and pioneered the rural school movement (Lee 117). In 1909, at Riverside School in Galt, Hart organized the first rural school fair, where 58 students displayed their produce. The event was the beginning of a tradition in the community and would come to represent the quality of agricultural excellence in Waterloo (Lee 117). According to the official 4-H history, the objectives of the school fair were fourfold: to interest children in what is grown on the farm, encourage better quality produce, train pupils in friendly competition, and provide a link between home and school (Cormack 6). In this way, the provincial government used this extracurricular activity to provide hands-on career training for farmers. In addition to the benefits that children gained from participating in school fairs, there was the broader aim of improving the quality and effectiveness of agricultural production (Jones 137). One of the main reasons for school fairs was so that the provincial government could effectively disseminate improved seed stock to rural communities.

School fairs were a part of the broader rural school movement. This movement was an initiative to bring practical instruction to students in rural areas so that they could learn skills related to farming, mechanics, and domestic sciences. While there was historical precedent for agricultural curriculum because it had been attempted in the 1870s, agriculture being taught in schools was a contentious issue. In the late nineteenth century, the superintendent of Education, Egerton Ryerson, attempted to add agricultural classes to the curriculum of rural schools. Ryerson had studied European schools and planned to introduce a similar educational model, which would offer more hands-on courses (Biesenthal 19). In 1871, the Education Act passed and led to the implementation of a new, more practical curriculum; however, the Education Act was short-lived and the classes were quickly dropped. Parents opposed the classes because they believed that farming could only be taught on the farm, not in a classroom. One of the main issues with this early attempt at agricultural classes was the lack of capable teachers. Since many rural schools had young village girls as teachers, these courses were initially taught by those who held little authority over farm boys and had limited knowledge of farming (Biesenthal 17). The Agricultural Representatives would remedy this issue with their extensive knowledge of farming. In some schools where there was no Agricultural Representative, it was up to dedicated teachers to instigate school plots and fairs. These teachers often faced resistance if they were seen as inexperienced. Nevertheless, some teachers became

involved in nurturing the growth of farming clubs. Between Agricultural Representatives and inspiring teachers, the rural school movement was able to flourish in the early twentieth century.

Other young farmer's clubs were born out of what was called the 'short course.' Starting in 1912, the Department of Agriculture offered one-month courses for young aspiring farmers (Lee 117). These courses were extended to three months in 1921 because of initial success and enthusiasm for more material. It was from these courses that the Junior Farmer's and Junior Association clubs came about. These courses were offered at the Ontario Agricultural College in Guelph and provided practical and theoretical instruction on farming (Biesenthal 3). The Department of Agriculture encouraged teachers of these courses to form clubs so that students would maintain enthusiasm and keep up to date with farming practices after the course had ended. Teachers were instructed to hand out pamphlets for the Junior Farmer's Association and explain the club's constitution; regardless of how many people signed up, teachers were expected to set up a club ("Letter from Minister"). In one such letter the Agricultural Representative stated, "I am thoroughly convinced that the most effective work can be done through young farmers of the Province and I just want to impress upon you the importance of fostering this movement" ("Letter from Supervisor"). Clearly, this initiative was thought to be an effective method for the well being of farming in Ontario.

Another reason for the creation of these clubs is evident in the 1918 constitution of the Junior Farmer's Association. The 1918 constitution states that the association should "create a deeper and more permanent interest in the agricultural life of the district" ("Constitution 1918"). The Junior Farmer's Association was to do this by disseminating agricultural knowledge, holding competitions, conducting experiments (such as fertilizing, spraying, and apiculture), and introducing better quality crops ("Constitution 1918"). The provincial government felt that Ontario was falling behind in global standards and farming technology; if Ontario was not able to change stubborn, older farmers, then they would have better luck targeting their sons (Biesenthal 6). This proved to be an effective method because the young farmers were able to show the rest of the community their success in growing higher quality crops. Children would also perform demonstrations, such as spraying pesticides on crops, and hold competitions where they would have a chance to display their agricultural achievements (Biesenthal 12). One example of this can be seen in the farming diaries of Will Barrie, who was an active member of the Junior Farmer's Institute and the son of a farmer in North Dumfries Township. In 1912, the Barrie farm was selected as one of eight "illustration farms" in Ontario ("Diaries of Will Barrie"). Farmers were able to look at the Barrie farm and see their success with new farming techniques.

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The Junior Farmer's Institute also provided Will Barrie with the opportunity to observe and learn from other experimental farms ("Diaries of Will Barrie"). Farmers were more inclined to embrace new farming techniques and invest in better seed when they could see the beneficial results firsthand.



Fig. 1. Agricultural Representative and farmer inspecting crops  
(Biesenthal 1981, Front Cover).

Although Agricultural Representatives eventually concentrated their efforts on youth, reaching out to younger people was not their initial focus. In 1907 when Agricultural Representatives were first sent out, they had no clear instruction on how to accomplish their goal. Agricultural Representatives only knew that they had to educate rural farmers about new scientific farming practices and persuade them to adapt to a new market. Older farmers were often stubborn and did not readily welcome the advice of a young graduate outsider. One Agricultural Representative re-

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called that, on multiple occasions, farmers told him “farmers here don’t much hold with your teaching their boys a lot of highfalutin book-farming” (Biesenthal 21). While Representatives were not welcomed with open arms into rural communities, they had a sort of ‘missionary zeal’ and persisted until they gained the trust of rural farmers. It was their work with young people that helped change attitudes; “the idea of working with young people and, through them, capturing the interest and enthusiasm of parents proved to be a winning combination” (Biesenthal 8). Through Agricultural Representatives, the provincial government was able to educate young people in farming and start an agricultural reformation.

Peter McArthur, a popular contributor to the *Farmer’s Advocate*, provides an example of young people who instigated change in agricultural practices. In his article “Our First Sheep”, McArthur told the story of how his young boys had bought a few sheep. McArthur reflects an opinion that was popular among older farmers regarding animals when he claimed that if he had bought sheep, he would have chosen the old pioneer variety that was thought to be reliable. Instead, on the advice of scientists, the boys opted for “properly registered, pedigreed sheep from a prize-winning flock” (McArthur 83). It is evident here that the children were open to the advice of experts and would spend their money following expert advice. In the end, the sheep that the boy’s had bought impressed McArthur; in this way, the children provided an opportunity to influence the way an old farmer thought about breed quality.

The non-agricultural aspect of these young farmer’s clubs should also be noted. In addition to agricultural projects, many of the clubs placed a heavy focus on public speaking and debating in their early years. For instance, in the *Junior Farmer’s Improvement Association of Wellington’s* minute book, the first few years of the association are primarily concerned with the organization of debate and public speaking contests rather than agricultural contests or demonstrations. The *Wellington Junior Farmer’s Improvement Association* held their first debate in New Hamburg in 1920 and recorded 120 people in attendance (Leslie 12). In such contests, contestants were judged on content, choice of words, delivery, and appearance (“Minute Book”). These contests were often organized in collaboration with other community organizations and offered prizes such as medals. By 1923, the club aimed to organize contests in debating, public speaking, dramatics, music, and hockey (“Minute Book”).

The Department of Agriculture had an agenda for agricultural clubs that was structured around debating and public speaking; they wanted boys who participated to become leaders in their communities. By developing their argumentation skills, these boys would be better respected and more equipped to convince a board of older farmers about the benefits of new farming practices (Biesenthal 19). It was not enough to convince the young farmers of the benefits of more scientific farming; if



The Department of Agriculture wanted to transform provincial farming, they would have to ensure that these young farmers were ready to take the lead in their communities. While the club offered young people a chance to develop and test their skills outside of agriculture, they nonetheless organized an agricultural fair where participants were judged on heavy horses, beef cattle, dairy cattle, sheep, and bacon hogs (“Minute Book”). The boys were used as judges in this fair so that they could develop an eye for livestock. Debating, public speaking, and judging were all parts of a program that was intended to groom young men into becoming agricultural leaders and extensions of the Department of Agriculture.

The young farmer’s clubs enjoyed success in their first decade in Waterloo county and Ontario as a whole. In 1914 there were three Junior Farmer’s Association clubs with a total of 95 members in Ontario. By 1924, there were 124 clubs and 3,693 members (“Membership Book”). The first club in Waterloo was the Elmira branch that began in 1915 with 30 members. Every subsequent year another branch was added to Waterloo Region until 1921 when there were a total of eight branches (“Membership Book”). Precursors to the 4-H Clubs, the Boys and Girls Clubs, also flourished in Waterloo Region at this time. Clubs, such as the 4-H Clubs and the Boys and Girls Clubs, spread across Canada during these years, indicating that rural youth were interested in becoming more involved in agriculture.

School fairs were often the first events in which newly established clubs participated. Accordingly, fairs provide a starting point for examining the significance that agricultural clubs had on the lives of youth and the rural community in Waterloo. The 4-H motto was to learn by doing, and that is exactly what youth did by working on their projects for the school fair. Aside from allowing youth to learn the importance of using better quality seed, school fairs gave young people a sense of pride in their own work. In *Heavy Burdens on Small Shoulders*, Rollings-Magnusson argues that rural children were an integral part of the farm and had many farm-related responsibilities (133). It is unlikely that farm children needed a school fair project to teach them how to raise crops or livestock. Instead, school fairs provided the unique opportunity for children to work on and take pride in their own project. Fairs also introduced young people to a new breed of animal or seed stock that they would be able to compare to their parents’ livestock or produce. This project motivated students who were not interested in learning about agriculture itself. In addition, unlike older generations, younger students were more enthusiastic to try new things. As Frank Hart recalls in his memoirs, “the children showed none of the indifference or wariness of their parents” (Biesenthal 28). Hart also noted that the yields from children’s school fair plots would often convince farmers to invest in better quality seed (Biesenthal 29).

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School fairs achieved the goal of introducing better quality seed and livestock to farms. In her composition for a school fair, one thirteen year old girl stated that the objective of youth projects was to stimulate the interest of boys and girls about pure-bred fowl and higher grade produce (Lewis 116). In the same essay the girl said:

There is a rumor that the club will not be continued, but even if that is so, in a sense it will never be discontinued, because we have a start on purebred fowl and seed potatoes and corn and our motto is 'I will never give up until I succeed.' (Lewis 117)

In a similar type of essay, another girl noted that it "is very beneficial to the boys and girls, as it has the effect of making them more interested in their work" (Lewis 70). School fairs offered rural youth the chance to develop their skills and interests, and met the provincial government's goal to raise the quality of Ontario's crops and livestock.

School fairs were a community event that brought school and home life closer together. The first school fair in Waterloo Region took place in 1909 and attracted 250 people (Lee 117). Fairs brought learning home in a concrete sense because youth learned about farming in a hands-on manner. This type of learning was useful because many young people would grow up to become farmers or farmer's wives. Fairs also brought 'home to school' as parents were able to witness their children's work. Furthermore, the school fair provided a place for rural connectivity in that it was often one of the largest annual community events. At a fair in 1911, one of the parents thanked Frank Hart by saying, "let it be an inspiration for us to keep in touch with our children's school life and someday we'll rise up and call that man blessed who instigated the School Fair" (Biesenthal 30). This type of education was an instantiation of the contemporary pedagogical theory that stressed both practical and scientific schooling. Social or progressive education was the answer to what sociologists viewed as 'the rural education problem' (Taylor 63). Sociologists of the early twentieth century believed that rural education needed to be more vocational and relevant to the daily lives of rural children. Therefore, it was in the context of a movement towards practical education that young farmer's clubs and school fairs enjoyed success.

Young farmers clubs strengthened community ties in rural Waterloo. These clubs provided new opportunities for socializing and matchmaking. Aside from church, boys and girls clubs offered an acceptable context in which young men and women could interact. While school fairs and other social events were a mixture of both boys and girls, Junior Farmer's Associations only mention male members

during this time period; young women participated in Junior Women's Institutes and other similar groups. The Wellington Junior Farmer's Association memoirs indicate that the club, in collaboration with the women's club, occasionally put on banquets, lawn socials, garden parties, and joint meetings that ended with a dance (Leslie 13). In 1913, Will Barrie notes in his diary that he held a Farmer's Institute picnic at his farm with 140 people in attendance. The next year the number rose to an astounding 300 people ("Diary of Will Barrie"). Aside from hosting such events, Will Barrie also attended regular meetings, excursions, and conventions related to the Farmer's Institute. In 1912, he noted eight such meetings and in 1914 he noted nine, more than any other social gathering or club that he attended ("Diary of Will Barrie"). These excursions offered young farmers a break from their heavy workload and the chance to socialize.

Young farmer's clubs were a force for agricultural change in their communities. An article in *The Farmer's Advocate*, a popular rural periodical, notes that neighbours and relatives were more inclined to use new farming techniques when they saw the success of these methods firsthand ("Farmer's Advocate"). One of the new technologies that young farmers endorsed was the use of pesticides on fruit trees. As early as 1910, there is photographic evidence of farmers in Waterloo County preparing for an apple spraying demonstration (Biesenthal 7). Young farmers also promoted specialization. At the beginning of the twentieth century, most farms in Waterloo were mixed; they grew various crops and raised different animals such as pigs, cattle, sheep, and poultry. Specializing in one type of animal or crop, however, was quickly becoming one of the best ways to keep a farm profitable (Biesenthal 6). It was difficult for families who had farmed the same way for generations to trust new methods, which, to them, would mean risking their livelihood. Young farmers, however, were able to show their fathers and neighbours that adapting to new agricultural practices could ultimately benefit their farms (Biesenthal 9). Furthermore, Junior Farmer's Associations emphasized the business side of farming (Biesenthal 12). The importance of business is evident in the amount of energy that these associations put into developing business-related skills such as debating and public speaking. In post-war years, Junior Farmer's branches were included in the Department of Agriculture's marketing initiatives; for example, in 1921, Agricultural Representatives began conducting swine marketing courses (Biesenthal 67). Emphasizing the importance of business was especially important to Waterloo Region where many farmers were Mennonites and reluctant to discuss such matters publically.

In 1919, almost 83,000 young people in Ontario were involved in the Department of Agriculture's rural youth program (Biesenthal 56). School children had also cultivated 50,000 home plots, which amounted to a quarter of all farms in Ontario (Biesenthal 56). It was said, "the future of agriculture in the province was in remark-

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ably capable, and sometimes remarkably small, hands” (Biesenthal 6). By 1919, a full-fledged young farmer’s movement was sweeping Ontario. In one of their club histories that discusses the growth of the young farmers movement, 4-H stated:

It was inspired by energetic and idealistic agricultural officials, dedicated school teachers and interested and cooperative parents and friends. From this it grew into an outstandingly successful youth group, with its influence switched almost imperceptibly from the development of agricultural produce to the development of the youth himself and with him, the community in which he lives. (Cormack 1)

The young farmers movement continued to grow; by 1922, there were 104 Junior Farmer’s Improvement Associations, 37 Boys’ and Girls’ Clubs, and 490 Rural School Fairs (Biesenthal 67).

While children and youth are sometimes overlooked in community histories, they play an important role in community development. In Waterloo Region, school fairs provided an opportunity for children and farmers to learn about the latest breeds, crops, and farming technologies. School fairs were also a way to connect home life with school, and for Agricultural Representatives to become integrated into rural communities. For pre-adolescents and teenagers, Boys’ Clubs and Girls’ Clubs presented an opportunity not only to gain experience with new farming methods, but also to develop business skills such as public speaking. For older boys and young men, Junior Farmer’s Improvement Associations provided a way to showcase what they learned from provincial government initiatives. Young men, such as Will Barrie, were able to demonstrate that new agricultural techniques and technologies could result in a flourishing farm. In these ways, youth in Waterloo Region helped usher farming into a new era in their community.

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