

## History of Kentucky 4-H Teen Conference

Mark A. Mains

Except for the war years in the 1940's, Teen Conference has been a significant part of the Kentucky 4-H experience since 1921. The early version of Teen Conference was called by several different names--4-H Week, Congress, and Senior Conference. Throughout the years, the conference has been held on the University of Kentucky campus in Lexington.

In early years, young 4-H members walked or rode horse back to train stations to catch the train to Lexington. Some railroads even provided free travel from rural Kentucky for the youth, their leaders and agents. Once in Lexington, many walked from the train station to campus, about 2 miles, while carrying baggage. Staff members from UK also assisted by pushing wheelbarrows or pulling wagons to help with the bulky loads. For some, this was the first major trip away from home and their first visit to UK.

While today's participants stay in campus dorms and eat in cafeterias, early accommodations were primitive. 4-H'ers brought live chickens, eggs, and vegetables from home for meals. They camped in tents where the UK football stadium now stands. At that time, the UK campus was very much out in the country and a long way from downtown.

In the earliest years, separate programs were held for males and females. In some years, only junior 4-H'ers participated; other years, both junior and senior members were involved. Since 1978, the conference has focused on senior 4-H'ers, both males and females.

Teens fill major roles in planning and running this conference. They are sure to include an exciting balance of educational, social, and recreational opportunities. Governors, senators, top coaches and athletes, dignitaries from major walks of life, a famous general, a millionaire, a member of a top rock group and many other outstanding speakers, including teens, have challenged and entertained during this yearly 4-H tradition.

Today's conference includes issues, concerns and experiences of which participants in the past would never have dreamed. From AIDS to the issue of Date Rape, Boomerangs to Computers, Making a Million \$\$\$ to the design of Robotics, and from Sign Language to Water Quality--the educational experiences are second to none.

Back then as to now, bright and energetic young people join in to enjoy the recreation, meeting of new friends and the renewed pleasure of seeing old friends again. Some even met future spouses as several who met during the conference later married. The tradition of campaigning and election of State 4-H Officers continues today much like it began in 1921.

The campus experience has helped many make decisions about further education and future careers. Lifetime friendships have greatly enriched lives. Many share that it was during this experience that they first saw themselves as talented enough and able to successfully fill larger roles than they had ever envisioned before.

Whether called 4-H Week, Congress, Senior Conference or Teen Conference, literally thousands of members have made new friends, discovered talents, and further developed their knowledge, leadership and citizenship skills through this 4-H experience.

---

Mark A. Mains, Extension Associate for 4-H Youth Development, Teen Programs

Agriculture & Natural Resources • Family & Consumer Sciences • 4-H/Youth Development • Community & Economic Development

**Educational programs of the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service serve all people regardless of race, color, age, sex, religion, disability, or national origin.**