

A family's legacy of farming and 4-H

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West of Ireland on the northwest corner of Dubois County sits a 100 acre farm in the middle of a pastoral paradise. Traveling north on ruler-straight 800 West, sparse farm-houses line the road. No campaign signs or billboards can be seen for miles. The land is relatively preserved in a serene time capsule from the early 20th century. Golden fields of harvested corn and soybeans sprawl across the landscape.

A farming legacy remains intact with 82-year old Donald Eck, a founding 4-H council member in Dubois County, still at the helm of his mother's family farm. His parents married in 1931 and moved to the Senning farm. His father, Carl Eck helped form and lead the first 4-H club in Boone Township, the Pioneers Club. Carl was also involved with Purdue Extension committees. The first ever 4-H youth club started in 1902, in Clark County, Ohio after an 1890s study called for "the education of the head, heart and hands" for rural children. These first youth groups focused on the fundamental projects of soil, farm animals, tools, cookery and housekeeping.

Before the first Dubois County 4-H Fair was held in 1968 on the current grounds north of Bretzville, the fair was held in Huntingburg's 1st Street Park. With collaboration from the

American Legion, the fair featured an animal pen around an oak tree and a shelter house for projects. Donald says the first rain would make it so muddy, the animals would be filthy. He and his brother were among the last 4-Hers showing hogs at the old fair. The focus was not on the youth projects. He remembers the draw of the fair being an enormous tent that featured a beer garden and a salacious ladies entertainment program called the "Hoot Show."

Donald says the 4-H Council wanted to make the county fair more family friendly. So in 1966, 4-H Council President Herb Thyen purchased the 140 acres on behalf of the county for the 4-H fairgrounds and the adjacent park. Eck says the county council and commissioners approved the purchase which they paid back to Thyen over time. Crews started bulldozing hills in 1967 and constructed three buildings which are still standing.

Now expanded to 207 acres, the fairgrounds and the Dubois County Park are located on State Road 162, one mile north of the junction with State Road 64 at Bretzville. Donald served seven years on the Dubois County 4-H Council. His role was running the tractor pull that attracted a lot of local farmers. Donald says the fair in 1968 was so muddy, the first year tractor pull was held in the cattle barn, only a thin rope separating the audience from the action. The outdoor stadium was consequently built the next year.

Purdue Extension Educator Kenny Eck, Donald's oldest and only son, recalls the tractor pulls and being very involved in 4-H for as long as he can remember. He would stay at his grandma's house near the fairgrounds while his parents attended 4-H events.

"I remember as a kid sitting on the bleachers, while my dad ran a tractor pull," Kenny

says. "I was born about the same time the fairgrounds came. I grew up with the 4-H fair."

Growing up in a 4-H world, Kenny knew before going to Purdue University for field crops management that he wanted to pursue a job as the Extension Educator. His passion for agriculture education mainly stems from many 4-H stories told by his father. He was especially keen on stories about C.A. Nicholson, a former county agriculture agent (extension educator). He also remembers Nicholson and his dad grabbing a pig and throwing it in the backseat of their vehicle to take to fair.

"There was a constant sense of community involvement and education around me," Kenny says. "I liked what they were doing. You get to solve puzzles all day."

Jim Peter, the extension educator Kenny took over from, was also his neighbor growing up. Also a family friend, Kenny has fond memories of Peter assisting him with a 4-H forestry project by helping shave grain off blocks of wood to identify tree species. Kenny was in 4-H for 10 years. As extension educator, Kenny shared carved blocks of trees to identify with prospective 4-Hers at the program's opening expo on November 15. Aside from teaching youth in the clubs, Kenny's job is to be a liaison between Purdue University and local residents and farmers.

"It's like an extension cord coming from Purdue University," Kenny says. "They do the research and we bring it back home."

Kenny's expertise is in insects' effects on crops and teaching farmers to apply pesticide in an effective but responsible way. His work is always varied, though, and he says he's learning more every day from specialists like bee-keepers and from single crop farmers. He says there has also lately been a renewed interest in local food.

The origins of agriculture and 4-H in Dubois County are chock full of stories of neighbors banding together. Donald mentions a story of more than 20 neighborhood farmers coming together in the 1940s to help Donald's Uncle Lawrence harvest corn with horses, after his hand was mangled in a grinder. Most area families were farmers, raising a variety of livestock and crops.

The calm rural setting has been shaken up since Donald was a boy. In recent years, Solar Sources has leased land in the area for their "Shamrock" coal mine, now totaling 2,200 acres. Donald joined neighbors and leased 160 acres to the coal mine across from his homestead, because he reasoned the trucks



Carl Eck holds onto a lamb over snow-covered ground while posing with his excited young son Donald on their Boone township farm (circa 1940).

clunked by his property to get to the mine either way. He expressed slight remorse for the decision as he finds his once serene landscape torn apart by the unearthing through thunderous dynamite that shakes his house. "It's a good thing I don't hear as well anymore," he remarks.

On a recent visit his 6-year old grandson went wide-eyed when an earthquake from the mine unexpectedly rattled him. Solar Sources intends to open additional coal fields to the north and the southwest of the current field for a roughly 1,800 acres addition. Down the road, Kenny lives directly in front of the northern edge of the mine on Portersville Road West, on an acre farm sold to him by Donald.

After buying out neighbors, Donald owns 500 acres of farmland in three locations. Besides his 100 acres farm, he owns land farther down 800 W and also land in Pike County. After his wife, Margaret, passed away in 2000, land in her name went to their three children; Kenny (with wife Christine) has two daughters, Liesl and Gabby; daughter Karen (husband Joe) Werner, of Ferdinand has four children, Breanne, Nick, and twins Ben and Will, and youngest daughter Karla (with husband John) Brumfield has two kids, Jake and Katherine; Donald also sold 20 acres to the Brumfields. All of his children and grandchildren were/are part of 4-H.

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Donald Eck shows off his first 4-H sow with piglets on the family's farm. He was proud because the sow received four blue ribbons. Eck says everybody raised hogs when he was growing up.