tools of the trade

Jim Long, "TT" editor
Washington State University

4-H: An American Idea


For the historian, this book is a well-documented chronology of a long-established American institution. For the sociologist, this book is a presentation of the development of one of the most successful educational efforts. For 4-H—whether member, leader, or professional, this book is a fascinating account of a unique 20th century phenomenon.

4-H: An American Idea is the culmination of careful research by the Wessels. They include not only basic facts, facts that would have been lost in a few more years, but also a great deal of background information.

Each of the 12 chapters is written about a specific theme—organizing 4-H, learning by doing, and international 4-H, for example. The appendix includes an added value—a 15-page chronology of 4-H.

In addition to the many achievements of 4-H, the authors also freely discuss past racial segregation in 4-H, the problem of moving away from being just a rural youth agency, difficulty of low-member retention, and internal controversies that at times plagued 4-H.

The Wessels’ 4-H history is an excellent companion piece to Reck’s The 4-H Story—a 1951 book about establishing the 4-H movement.

Maurice Johnson
University of Idaho

Editor’s Note: In the letter that accompanied this review, Johnson added another interesting perspective. "As I began reading the
Wessels' history of 4-H, I soon realized I was also reading much of my own personal history. Having joined 4-H as a club member in the early 1940s, I became aware of the 4-H World War II efforts. The background about National 4-H Congress, National 4-H Camp, and the International Farm Youth Exchange added to my knowledge of events in which I had participated. Since 1958, I've been associated professionally with 4-H. I'm sure my gratitude to the Wessels for their presentation of the 4-H history will be shared by hundreds as they read this recent document. Many, of course, will have known or will recognize the key players."

JL