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Farm Youth and Progressive Agricultural Reform: Dexter D. Mayne and the Farm Boy Cavaliers of America

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Abstract
In the early years of the twentieth century, rural America faced a population crisis as young people increasingly left farms for cities. Progressive reformers responded to this crisis with various suggestions meant to more firmly attach youngsters to their rural roots. Among the many solutions advocated were rural youth organizations. The Farm Boy Cavaliers of America, which also enrolled girls, pursued a more innovative path than most, emphasizing not only entertainment and instruction, but also a high degree of economic education and independence for farm children. The program offered an alternative to the Boy Scouts, which Dexter D. Mayne, the organization's founder, believed to be unsatisfactory and inappropriate for farm youth. Ultimately, the organization may have promoted too much freedom for the rural youth, advocating behavior that parents could not approve of or afford in the cash-strapped early days of the century.

Disciplines
Agricultural Education | Cultural History | Early Childhood Education | United States History

Comments
Farm Youth and Progressive Agricultural Reform:
Dexter D. Mayne and the Farm Boy Cavaliers of America

Submitted by Pamela Riney-Kehrberg
Iowa State University
Who?

Hoo-rah-ray,

Hoo-rah-ray,

Farm Boy Cavaliers, U.S.A.

Where?

One-two-three,

Three-two-one,

Russellville Cavaliers,

Troop No. One.

What?

Service, Honor,

Loyalty, Thrift,

What’s your job?

Community uplift – Rah!

Farm Boy Cavaliers

Russellville, Illinois, Troop No. 1

This noisy cheer was the cry of a group of enthusiastic boys, the Farm Boy Cavaliers, Troop No. 1, of Russellville, Illinois. They were participants in a small, short-lived, but highly innovative program originating in the School of Agriculture of the University of Minnesota. Facing a national farm population crisis, the Farm Boy Cavaliers’ founder, Dexter D. Mayne, Principal of the School of Agriculture, created an organization that he believed would encourage youngsters to remain on farms. He sought
to bring progressive era agricultural and educational reform to boys and girls throughout the nation.

Mayne was responding to conditions that existed in most rural communities in the U.S. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the countryside was very clearly suffering from a rural youth “problem.” Sometimes cast as a “boy problem,” and at some times a “girl problem,” agrarian reformers and some (but not all) rural parents lamented the migration of rural youth to America’s growing cities and towns. Youngsters, rebelling against the confines of rural life, increasingly chose paths that led out of agriculture, and toward urban locations. Even more distressingly, it appeared that it was the best and the brightest, the most ambitious of rural youth, who were abandoning the countryside at an alarming rate.²

Suggestions about how to stem the tide flooded in from numerous directions. Educational reformers and members of President Theodore Roosevelt’s Country Life Commission argued that the solution to the problem lay in the improvement of rural schools. In fact, the Commissioners held rural schools “to be largely responsible for ineffective farming, lack of ideals, and the drift to town.” They asserted that “teaching should be visual, direct, and applicable,” and should address issues of agricultural life. Improved education, and an education that emphasized rural subjects and practices, would impress youngsters with the beauties of the countryside, and the importance of their continuing role in rural communities.³ These thoughts were echoed around the country. A correspondent with the Nebraska Farmer indicted the schools for providing useless education, when they could be teaching boys about handling of tools, keeping books, spelling, writing, and speaking. Such training would prepare boys to “stick to the
Improved agricultural education, reformers believed, would lead to stronger rural communities, and provide for the material needs of an increasingly urban and industrial nation.\(^4\)

Achieving these goals, however, involved more than educational reform. Others emphasized the importance of providing rural boys an economic stake in their family enterprises. Too often, observers argued, fathers took their sons’ labor for granted, and failed to provide them with any remuneration for their efforts on behalf of the family. Many fathers confiscated the funds that boys earned from work off the farm, or from independent projects on the family farm, as was their legal right. Common as they were, these practices worked against retaining boys on the farm.\(^6\) Edgar G. Menizer, of the Kansas State Agricultural College, argued that parents should give boys a literal financial stake in the farm in the form of crops or animals under their care. Any boy who profited from his endeavors “should be allowed to keep the money and spend it for himself.”\(^7\) Menizer and others believed that a boy with an investment in the farm, and an opportunity to benefit financially from it, would be more willing to make a lifetime commitment to agriculture.

Reformers, on the whole, were less concerned about the girl problem on the farm. As an editor for the *Kansas Farmer* noted, “The agricultural papers teem with articles on ‘How to Keep the Boys on the Farm,’ but seldom a word about the girls. Now, we could not think of doing without the boys. Bless the dear, noisy boys! . . . The girls, precious jewels, are just as essential to farm life as the boys.”\(^8\) Their near-absence from the literature, however, was perhaps unsurprising. Girls, after all, rarely inherited the family enterprise, and most of their contemporaries did not think of them as farmers.
Nevertheless, when reformers thought long and hard about the subject, they realized that the fate of rural girls was, in fact, quite important. After all, without them, how many rural boys would be willing to stay in the countryside as a long term proposition? If there were no rural girls, eventually there would be no rural boys, and no farm families to provide for the nation’s most basic needs.9

The approach to maintaining the population of rural girls bore many of the same characteristics as the campaign to maintain the boys: teachers needed to educate girls about the importance of their adult roles as farm wives and mothers, and their parents needed to provide them with a stake in the family enterprise. Girls generally had fewer opportunities than boys to earn some sort of money on their own, and less of an opportunity to enjoy the satisfaction of payment for a job well done. Flora Bullock of the University of Nebraska urged farm parents to send their daughters into the barnyards and fields to do “fascinating productive work outdoors.” She clarified her statement, writing “I do not mean to suggest that any effort be made to make the farm girl a ‘real farmer,’ doing the heavy work with cattle or in the fields.” She argued parents should allow their daughters education in (small) animal husbandry, fruit, vegetable and poultry production, and other forms of profitable work. She argued that girls should earn their own money, and keep their own accounts as they dealt with paying customers.10 Reformers also encouraged parents to make the farm home more attractive to rural girls by improving the tools with which they worked. “If your daughter has been fortunate enough to attend or even to visit a school where the home-making arts are taught, she will not be satisfied to use the awkward, heavy, worn-out tools of her grandmother’s day.”11 Farms could be made appealing even to educated, forward looking girls.
Some observers added another facet to the plan to retain rural youth: recreation. As much as work came first in the lives of most rural youngsters, play was an increasingly important element in modern understandings of childhood. While most 19th century Americans failed to embrace play as an essential element of childhood (inculcating habits of work and the basics of literacy were far more important), by the early 20th century, many middle class Americans believed deeply in play as a creative force in children’s lives. Concerned parents and agricultural reformers endorsed the idea of improved recreational opportunities on farms, by providing reading materials, musical instruments, and equipment for games, such as croquet. As early as 1874, the domestic department editor for the *Kansas Farmer* was putting in “a word for the boys.” She argued that “Some kind of recreation should be provided after every day’s work, ‘all work and no play, makes Jack a dull boy,’ and if it is ever so simple, some game, or book, or social enjoyment should make him forget, in a measure, the mere drudgery of the day.” A writer for the *Farmer’s Wife* argued the same for farm girls. “There are so many beautiful and interesting things for a girl to do enjoy in the country – skating, driving, the sunsets, the wild flowers and animals, the birds, the farmyard pets – but if she is in treadmill, all heart is worked out of her and she is too tired to enjoy the wonderful beauties surrounding her.” To solve the problem, farm parents could provide “lawn swings, porch rockers, croquet sets” and other inexpensive but “pleasure giving” luxuries.

While early twentieth century educational reformers endorsed free, undirected play to a certain degree, they especially approved of directed play, in which children and youth more or less inadvertently absorbed lessons about cooperation, creativity, and
discipline through educative play activities. Reformers envisioned, and implemented, this directed leisure in a number of different settings. For urban youngsters, this often took the form of the supervised playground, or participation in activities such as Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and Camp Fire Girls. In fact, reformers specifically envisioned that the Boy and Girl Scouts would serve urban youth, deprived of the contact with nature that rural children enjoyed. Leaders of the Camp Fire Girls developed a more inclusive organization and tried to entice rural girls to join, believing that “Any Girl” had a place in their program, but few farm girls responded.

Without these organizations in place in rural areas, child life reformers believed that large numbers of children lacked “the right kind of play life, of intelligent contact with nature and of well-directed energy.” Farm boys and girls, when they had the opportunity for leisure, very rarely engaged in the sort of carefully organized, educational play that reformers recommended. They roamed the fields, pursuing their own interests in an unorganized manner. Parents and other adults rarely paid close attention to their activities. Many rural communities, if not most, lacked organized social activities for youth, outside of church. Scouting activities, for example, were not geared toward rural youth. Scouting organized youngsters into troops. Those troops required adult leadership, regular meetings and a minimum number of participants, usually at least eight. In many rural locations, fulfilling these requirements was a significant obstacle to participation. Farm parents were busy, rural roads poor, and heavy work schedules often stymied meetings. Additionally, youngsters often found it difficult, or even impossible, to find enough neighborhood boys or girls to start a troop.
Adult reformers struggled to find the best way to capture the interest and enrich the lives of rural youth. Born in corn, hog and tomato clubs for boys and girls, 4-H was an outgrowth of the desire to improve the agricultural education of farm boys and girls. A number of Midwestern states claim credit for the creation of 4-H, and by 1914, the Cooperative Extension Service of the United States Department of Agriculture was sponsoring the program. Children in 4-H learned modern techniques of agriculture and homemaking, and applied those techniques to their own projects. As the program matured, 4-H also emphasized leadership, public speaking, writing, and other skills useful to the rural young. Lacking, though, was the spirit of adventure prevalent in organizations such as the Boy and Girl Scouts.

The Farm Boy Cavaliers of America emerged as a rural alternative to both scouting and 4-H. Although almost completely forgotten today, the organization, founded in 1916, was a small but innovative social experiment. Dexter D. Mayne, Principal of the School of Agriculture at the University of Minnesota, bemoaned the lack of organized activities that met the particular needs of the rural young. As a teacher and administrator, Dexter D. Mayne involved himself in many of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century debates over the education of farm youth. Before coming to Minnesota, Mayne had worked in various teaching posts as well as superintendent’s positions in the upper Midwest. He was an enthusiastic advocate of school reform in rural communities. He published with a co-author one of the earliest agricultural textbooks to be used in the public schools, *First Principles of Agriculture*. Mayne believed that education as farm children experienced it only encouraged them to leave the countryside for the cities. Mayne wrote, “The study of civics, of geography, of history
and of biography has created ideals of greatness that find their expression only in city life. Even the so-called ‘Nature Study’ has been largely sentimental and urban in its leanings.” He asserted that “The result has been a continual and constantly increasing exodus of the most thoughtful and enterprising young men and young women of our rural districts to the cities.”

He hoped that the use of his scientific and practical text would direct youngsters’ interests back toward the farm, with “its industries, its economies, and its science the subjects of study.” Designed for use both in the schools and at home, the book would have worked equally well in the classroom or as a road map for independent study.

Mayne also participated in more formal agricultural study for pre-collegiate youth through the University of Minnesota’s School of Agriculture at University Farm in St. Paul. In 1903, he took the principal’s position, which he would hold until his death in 1929. The School of Agriculture, opened in 1888, educated rural young people with the intention of returning them to the farm. The school grew by leaps and bounds, and by 1900, yearly enrollment was approaching 600 students. The residential school emphasized practical agriculture as well as economics, business, social sciences and community welfare. Mayne and his faculty promoted progressive, scientific agriculture. About the school and its methods Mayne wrote:

We feel that the day when farming may be made more delightful is dawning. The farmers may do their work with greater effect, that each hour’s work may count for more, that the hours of labor per day may be lessened, that the drudgery of the farm home may be made easier, that the home may be made more charming, that more books may be in the
bookcase, that better magazines may be on the center table, that food may
be more easily prepared and better adapted to the needs of the family.26

Spreading agricultural education throughout Minnesota, however, faced a significant hurdle. Farm parents resisted sending their children long distances to the school. The vast majority of students came from no more than seventy to one hundred miles away, leaving a large proportion of the state’s youth unserved.27

Prior to Mayne’s administration, University of Minnesota Professor Willet M. Hays introduced and promoted the idea of “branch campuses” of the School of Agriculture. Additional schools would eventually open in locations such as Crookston, Morris and Grand Rapids.28 Even with the new locations, though, only a limited number of youngsters could take part in this formal agricultural education at the high school level. Many families were still beyond the seventy-five to one hundred mile radius that parents preferred. Additionally, boys and girls played a vital role in the labor force of their families’ agricultural enterprises. Encouraging a teenaged child to leave the farm for a residential school was unrealistic for many.29 Mayne, however, believed that education was integral to the future of American agriculture, so other means of spreading the gospel had to be found. He envisioned the Farm Boy Cavaliers of America as that means.30

Unlike fledgling 4-H, the FBCA would incorporate many of the bells and whistles that made scouting so appealing to young people – uniforms, ceremony, and adventure.31

The romantic element of the organization struck other adult observers as an important element in recruitment. M. V. O’Shea, an education professor at the University of Wisconsin, expressed his approval in a letter to the Farm Boy Cavaliers News. “You
have not only provided for co-operation among boys in the country, but you have given a
touch of romance to the organization, which is, I think, essential in order to maintain the
continued interest of the boys. The term Cavaliers will in itself attract boys.” Mayne also
tailored his organization to rural conditions. Unlike Boy Scouts, the organization only
required four youngsters per troop. Mayne required that the boys be at least twelve years
old, have access to a horse, and be able to ride at a gallop. The organization also
accommodated girls, as Home Cavaliers. Although the organization lasted only into the
late 1920s, boys and girls organized chapters in approximately thirty states.

Mayne’s vision of the organization was simple: “The Farm Boy Cavaliers is a
non-military organization of farm boys mounted on horses.” Its ideals were very similar
to those of the Boy Scouts – “Service, Honor, Thrift, Loyalty.” Its objects were more
specific to its rural location: “achievement on the farm and . . . community betterment.”
The organization charged Farm Boy Cavaliers to uphold twelve principles: service,
preparedness, honor, obedience, loyalty, kindness and charity, courtesy, courage,
industry, thrift, cleanliness, and reverence. Mayne emphasized the chivalry and romance
of the organization. Farm Boy Cavaliers were to provide service, especially to women,
the weak, and the aged. Their courage knew no bounds: “He will protect the weak and
the innocent, even at the cost of his life. Neither the badgering of friends nor the taunts
of enemies will make him back down from what he knows is right.” Farm Boy
Cavaliers continued the spirit of King Arthur, and the Knights of the Round Table.

As in the scouts, boys advanced through the ranks. Farm Boy Cavaliers moved
from Page to Esquire to Knight. Boys who did not have horses had the title of Yeoman.
While a Yeoman could advance from Page to Esquire, and could temporarily substitute a
bicycle for a horse, he could never become a Knight until he could participate on horseback. Advancement rested on two requirements; first, the boys had to accumulate a set number of achievement badges, and second, they had to make a financial investment in their farm projects or put their money to work in another way. To advance from Page to Esquire, a boy had to have fifty dollars in a farm project or in the bank, not an inconsequential sum in the nineteen-teens and twenties. To advance from Esquire to Knight, a boy had to have saved one hundred dollars. Farm Boy Cavaliers were to pay their own way in the organization, and earn the money required for participation themselves.

In addition, the organization required Farm Boy Cavaliers to have their own plot of land, and (quite surprisingly) to be paid for their work on the family farm. The organization required boys to enter into “An agreement under which, in consideration of the performance by the boy of a certain specified daily amount of work on the farm, he is to receive, aside from his board and lodging, a stipulated weekly wage in money.” If no land was available on his home farm, he was to seek out an agreement with a neighbor. Although Mayne did not explain his rationale for requiring boys and their parents to make a financial investment in order to participate in and advance in the organization, his motives may have been somewhat subversive. Those interested in reforming agriculture to maintain the interest of the young often suggested that farm children should have their own capital and their own investments – a suggestion that often did not sit well with farm parents. Such measures gave boys economic power and independence outside of the family unit, and outside of family control.
By incorporating this reform measure in the Farm Boy Cavaliers, Mayne may have been hoping to bypass parental objections, and institutionalize (under the guise of an idealistic youth organization) the idea of giving youngsters a stake in their parents’ operations. In addition to having money in the bank or investments in land, livestock and equipment, a boy could meet the requirement to invest with the purchase of life insurance, which represented “far-sighted thriftiness.” Mayne asserted that these arrangements were in no way a threat to parental authority. “In these suggestions there is no thought of lessening the obligations of honor and obedience, on the part of the boy to his parents; but simply to encourage a manly self-dependence such as is desirable in every boy, whether his parents be rich or poor.”

Mayne argued explicitly that in the case of rural boys, the Farm Boy Cavaliers were a more suitable alternative to the Boy Scouts. And, in the early twentieth century, the Boy Scouts, as an organization, were not much interested in farm boys. On the whole, the leadership believed that farm boys had little need for their “character building” organization. Farm boys, after all, were involved in all sorts of activities in their work and family lives that built character. Additionally, the Boy Scouts’ leadership felt little interest in directing their program toward vocational training in agriculture, which they believed would introduce an unnecessary element of toil into a leisure time pursuit for boys. As historian David MacLeod put it, “They did not want to beat paddles into plowshares.” In 1925, more than a quarter of American boys lived in the countryside, but only six percent of them (or less) were involved in Boy Scouting.

The Boy Scouts’ program was ill adapted to the countryside. Mayne, therefore, adapted his program to the conditions of life of rural youth. As previously mentioned, it
was difficult to find enough boys in rural communities to form troops. The Farm Boy
Cavaliers allowed boys to join as individual members (although the appeal of that option
may have been minimal), and also allowed boys living at a great distance from each other
to form troops, since their access to horses would theoretically minimize the problem.\textsuperscript{38}
Not only was troop size a problem in rural areas, leadership was also. The Boy Scouts of
America recruited educated middle class and lower middle class professional men to lead
its troops. These were not the sort of men that the Farm Boy Cavaliers sought, and
Mayne recognized that it was difficult to find adult men in rural communities with the
time and inclination to run a youth organization.\textsuperscript{39} “Carrying a man’s responsibilities on
a farm” was far more arduous than “the short hours of toil in vogue in the cities.” Mayne
dismissed the problem of the lack of adult leadership by assuming that young men
between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one would join the organization and lead the
troops, resolving the problem neatly (if somewhat fancifully).\textsuperscript{40}

The Boy Scouts, Mayne argued, also placed country boys in an unfair competition
with city boys. Many of the activities were urban-oriented, and required time and
resources unavailable to farm boys. “Consequently the city boy usually carries off the
most honors, and the country boy feels that he meets an unfair competition and is unduly
humiliated, ‘looked down upon’ by his fellow from the city.” With a horse to ride, and a
set of requirements more suited to his locale, the farm boy could now “‘look down’ in
turn, upon his otherwise better-situated city cousin.”\textsuperscript{41} During the nineteen-teens, Boy
Scouts did earn merit badges in a number of agricultural and agriculture-related areas,
such as Poultry Farming, Bee Farming, Dairying and Agriculture. The number of boys
earning badges in these areas, however, lagged far behind those in some of the most
popular areas, such as Swimming, Firemanship and First Aid. Although this chart represents just a few of the many areas in which youngsters could earn badges, it does serve to illustrate the relative marginalization of work related to agriculture.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Merit Badges Earned, 1911-1919</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total badges earned by all scouts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firemanship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swimming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Aid</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poultry Farming</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bee Farming/Keeping</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dairying</td>
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</tbody>
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Agriculture in its many forms made barely a ripple in the whole scheme of the Boy Scouts, consistently ranking in the bottom half of youngsters’ efforts, behind even such offerings as Bugling, Signaling and Civics.

But Mayne also argued a less obvious point. He believed that many of the activities that attracted city boys to scouting held little appeal for country boys. “Hiking through the country has no such attraction for a boy familiar with rural scenery, as for a boy living in a city home; neither does he feel, like the city boy, the lure of the woods, or the attractions of a camp by the side of a pretty lake – a lake which may be just like the one on the shore of which his father’s house is built.” Steeped in country life, farm boys had little need or desire to be introduced to it through their leisure activities.

Whether this was true or not is difficult to tell. Early twentieth century studies of farm
youth noted that, given the preponderance of rural scenery in their lives, rural youngsters often showed very little appreciation for the wonders of the landscape around them. Even so, there is no lack of evidence of rural youth making enthusiastic use of the landscape around them, as they hunted, explored and immersed themselves in the possibilities available in the countryside.

The reduced emphasis on hiking and camping, however, did not equate to a lessened concern about the relationship between youth and nature. One of the foremost principles of the organization was kindness – a courtesy not just extended to other humans, but to animals as well. A Farm Boy Cavalier “is kind . . . to his horses, and to other dumb animals. He protects the birds, and destroys animal life only when necessary to human welfare.” Although the vast majority of Farm Boy Cavalier activities leading to badges centered upon agricultural activities, such as barnyard sanitation, bee culture, and milk production, the organization also promoted an aesthetic appreciation of nature. Mayne’s vision for the organization included an admixture of activities we would consider traditional to scouting into the agricultural formula. Boys could easily work on these nature-based activities as they completed their daily chores. Farm Boy Cavaliers could pursue a Bird Study badge by naming and identifying a wide variety of birds, feeding birds in winter, and constructing nesting boxes. Those earning a Forestry badge planted and cultivated evergreens and woodland trees, and learned to fight forest fires. The Photography badge required a mastery of nature photography, as well as photography of general subjects. The organization encouraged boys to go “hunting with a camera,” instead of a gun, in line with the emphasis on kindness to all animals.
Oddly enough, given Mayne’s comments about redundancy of camping for farm boys, the Cavaliers’ program did include a camping element: the pilgrimage. Although the handbook did not describe the pilgrimage, the Farm Boy Cavalier News did. It included a trip to a secluded location on a “trusty steed,” cooking outdoors, mounted exploration of the countryside, and “discussion around the pilgrimage fire.” There was no mention of this being an overnight activity, rather, it was a form of day-camping.49 Given the prevalence of chores in farm children’s lives, staying away from home overnight was probably unrealistic. Parents would be more likely to allow activities that allowed youngsters to be at home or in the barn at the beginning and the end of the day.

What farm boys no doubt lacked was the time necessary to engage in activities unrelated to agriculture. Most farm children pursued a busy schedule of farm work interspersed with school, and had almost no time dedicated to leisure. The Farm Boy Cavaliers attended to this situation by tailoring achievement badges to the activities that farm youth encountered on a daily basis. They could work on badges while they completed their chores. While the Boy Scouts only offered a smattering of badges devoted to agriculture, the vast majority of Cavalier badges were directly or indirectly agricultural. Badges covered topics from Applied Chemistry, to Harness Oiling, to Manure Spreading. As with 4-H, the point of the organization was to make the young better, more progressive farmers. Crop projects required youngsters to choose and plant properly their seeds, to produce respectable yields, and to keep accurate records of costs and results. Animal projects required that participants calculate the expense of feed per pound gained. All projects emphasized a scientific approach to crop and livestock production. This approach was particularly apparent in the description of the Barnyard
Sanitation badge. The badge required youngsters to know the names of ten livestock diseases caused by germs, and how they spread from animal to animal and farm to farm. They also had to understand other conditions in livestock that would facilitate the spread of disease. The badge included a requirement to clean up an area of the barnyard that was unsanitary, and to document the improvement process with photographs. Finally, the badge required knowledge of the appropriate state office to contact in the case of communicable animal diseases on the farm, in particular, hog cholera. The badge requirements directed boys to the appropriate extension documents on the subject. In essence the achievement badges provided farm youth directed independent study in modern methods of agriculture. The Farm Boy Cavaliers learned the techniques agricultural reformers believed were necessary for success in twentieth century farming.

The organization also required youth to direct their focus toward the needs of farm communities. Outside of their individual work on badges, the Farm Boy Cavaliers required their troops to donate time to others. Some of these tasks were mundane, and merely needed doing on a regular basis; others had a tinge of adventure, and surely added to the romance of involvement. On the mundane side, the handbook suggested road maintenance, tree planting, and weed and vermin control as ways to serve the community. On the more adventurous side, it suggested patrolling the roads and fire control. “Their regular patrolling of the roads will make them a ready means for reporting their condition in case of wash-outs, landslides, etc.; of affording assistance to teams in difficulties; of carrying important messages; as in the case of someone in need of a doctor or surgeon; or giving warning of suspicious characters lurking about.”

Ideally, Farm Boy Cavaliers would also aid in community celebrations and ceremonies.
The organization would maintain its visibility in the community by hosting “tournaments,” where the boys would demonstrate their horsemanship and publicize their activities.52

Mayne was over-ambitious in his expectations of what the Farm Boy Cavaliers would be able to do for their communities. He envisioned their activities easing relations between the locals and the authorities, accomplishing tasks such as road repairs that often fell to resisting farmers: “These services in many instances relate to work the doing of which is a frequent matter of dispute between farmers and the authorities, with the result that often it is done inefficiently or not at all.” In order to accomplish these tasks, he planned on the participation of dozens of boys in any given community, something that never happened.53 A more realistic description of the community-oriented activities of Farm Boy Cavaliers appeared in an informal history of Troop No. 1 of Iowa, a group that began with four boys.

One day while going to play polo we noticed our neighbors hogs had broken out and our neighbor had hunted very much for them and had been unable to find them. So we gave chase on horseback, and would soon have rounded them up, had not fences prevented extensive use of horses. We had to continually dismount open gates and ride again. Nevertheless we rounded them up and brought them safely home, much to thanks of our neighbor. Thus we did one good turn and helped make FBC better known.54
These Farm Boy Cavaliers made their mark by being helpful neighbors and chasing escaped livestock. Good turns and being “generally useful” in the community was a realistic goal for small, self-directed groups of adolescents.  

Although Mayne christened his creation the Farm Boy Cavaliers, he also invited girls to join existing units, or form their own Home Cavalier units. In this way, the organization was very much like 4-H, which enrolled girls as well as boys. Although Mayne never mentioned the Girl Scouts by name, he more than likely found that organization to be an unsuitable alternative for farm girls. The Girl Scouts placed their primary emphasis on training girls to appreciate the out of doors, and to be able to fend for themselves while hiking and camping. Homemaking, and particularly the type done on farms, received very little attention in the first Girl Scout handbook, published in 1913. The organization also encouraged girls to think about careers – none of which included becoming a farm wife. Participation in the Girl Scouts would not lead toward the future that agricultural reformers wanted for America’s farm girls. The Camp Fire Girls were more oriented toward housewifery, hoping that household tasks accomplished out of doors, around the camp fire, would kindle girls’ interests in home making. Apparently this approach gained little traction in farm communities. Girls may have seen little point in going outside to do what their parents required them to do at home every day.  

Girls joined the Cavaliers, but in far smaller numbers than boys. While most of the troops listed only boys as members, four girls belonged to Troop No. 1 in Fergus, North Dakota, and one girl even acted as troop leader. Troop No. 2 of Clearfield, South Dakota and Troop No. 2 of Belvidere, Illinois, were composed entirely of girls. While
the boys were Cavaliers with the ranks of Page, Esquire and Knight, the girls were Home Cavaliers, with the ranks of Novice, Damoselle and Lady (or Loaf Giver). The qualification of the rank of Lady with the subtitle “Loaf Giver” remained unexplained in organization literature. A possible explanation is that Mayne wanted the term to be associated with labor and service to the community, rather than having the implication of idle nobility that it might have otherwise.

Mayne clearly put more effort into his planning for boys than his ideas for girls. While he carefully described the program for boys and the attributes of potential members, his discussion of the Home Cavaliers was scanty at best. Unlike the boys, there were no distinctive uniforms, but Mayne did his best to incorporate elements of adventure and romance into their program. “All Cavaliers are supposed to ride horses; therefore girls learn to ride as soon as possible after becoming members.” He struck an egalitarian note in other areas: “They take the same pledge, subscribe to the same principles, give the same salute, are entitled to equal franchise in the election of state and national officers. They may combine with the Farm Boy Cavaliers for drill, for instruction, and for pilgrimages and tournaments.”

Mayne incorporated limited elements of financial independence into the girls’ program, just as he had with the boys’. There was no mention of girls being given their own stake in the family farm or any type of wages for their work. This was, perhaps, too revolutionary. The girls would, however, engage in money-making projects and manage their own funds. To advance from Novice to Damoselle, girls had to earn achievement badges and have “$5 in the bank which she has earned through her own efforts.” To advance from Damoselle to Lady required a girl to have “$10 invested in some wise
home project or on deposit in the bank.” The rather significant difference in expected funds between boys and girls reflected a serious rural reality – boys generally had the opportunity to earn more money off the farm than girls, and crop and livestock projects had the potential to generate more funds than gardening, baking or sewing.60

For the most part, the Farm Boy Cavaliers did not require, but only suggested, a gender division of club work. In fact, in the discussion of Home Cavaliers, the manual specified that “achievement projects may be chosen from any that are listed in the manual.” Girls were free to choose to pursue projects in “automobile operation,” “manure-spreading,” or “pig-raising,” but the handbook listed eighteen projects that were either gender-neutral (by the standards of the day) or oriented more toward traditional farm work for females. Activities appropriate to both boys and girls included bee culture, bird study, civics, entomology, farm accounts, painting, personal health, photography, rope work and rural health. Those open to both sexes but more in keeping with traditional women’s work on Midwestern farms were butter making, canning, meat curing, plant diseases, sausage-making, milk production, gardening and poultry culture. Although they were not described in the manual, Mayne also listed sewing, garment making and bread making as achievements reserved to girls. He briefly noted that “Other home projects will be added later.”61

In all of these activities, knowledge of the most recent methods was paramount. Completion of most projects also involved extensive record keeping and memorization of production processes. When the girls completed domestic projects, the manual required that they seek out a woman “in charge of girls’ work in the state, or . . . teachers of domestic subjects in nearby schools,” to test them on their knowledge and
accomplishments. Note that presumably untrained, unscientific housekeeping mothers would not do. Mrs. Bertram Zelner, of Belvidere, Illinois, who helped the local Home Cavaliers with their projects described what may have been a fairly typical meeting: a work session spent sewing aprons, discussion of the “various phases of women’s work,” and plans for sessions on home nursing in the future. Unfortunately, information about the girls is scanty, and it is unclear to what degree they deviated from the proscribed course and incorporated stereotypically boys’ activities into their own.

Every organization has its limits, and even though the Mayne wanted the Farm Boy Cavaliers to be an all encompassing program for rural youth, not everyone could be brought into the fold. Although Mayne had limited the size of his troops to four boys, even this was not enough to accommodate all rural youngsters, many of whom lived a very isolated existence. Individuals could join without a troop, but the following would suggest that this was not a very attractive option. In July of 1917, Daniel Cain of rural Marietta, Ohio, wrote Mayne a plaintive letter. Although he had filled out a membership form and subscribed to the Cavalier News, he remained “anxious to join ‘The Farm Boy Cavaliers. I have no opportunity to organize a troop just now as there is nobody in my neighborhood that is old enough and has a horse. I have a brother that is twelve years old but he cannot ride good yet. He wants to join if he may.” Daniel ended his letter with a plea: “If there is any other Cavaliers that you know of who lives any ways near me let me know.”

Other boys, living in relatively isolated Great Plains locales were able to muster up enough interest to form a troop. In August of 1916, seven boys in Eckley, Colorado, in the far northwestern reaches of the state, organized a troop. Their leader, Dale
Catchpole, wrote to Leland Peterson, leader of the first troop of Farm Boy Cavaliers in Burt, Iowa, describing his troop and their activities. The Colorado troop’s experiences were probably fairly typical. Although the boys had “not done very much because we haven’t had time to do much this fall,” they intended “to make ourselves useful next summer.” Distance and work schedules created problems for their fledgling organization: “Our troop has some disadvantages because sometimes the boys cannot attend meetings because of various reasons and one member has to come usually about six miles to attend.” The boys persevered, and the mounted component of the organization facilitated interest and participation. “Our boys are all first class horsemen because everyone in this part of Colorado knows how to ride. . . . [we] run potato races and stake races and do a few other ‘stunts’ on horseback.”

*The Farm Boy Cavalier News* referred to the troop as the organization’s “cowboy” troop, because of their facility in “stunts” such as lassoing.

Dale Catchpole’s description of his family’s ranch would seem to indicate a moderate level of prosperity, and another limitation of the organization. The Catchpole family owned a section of land, and raised corn, sorghum, wheat, oats, and other forage crops. Their livestock included horses, cattle, milk cows, hogs and chickens. The Catchpole farm boasted a ten room house, and a plethora of outbuildings. Dale and Leonard, his brother, owned “a pair of Belgian horses, and two dandy greyhounds.” Although it is difficult to judge from the limited information available about individual members, the Catchpole boys’ situation may have been typical. The requirement that Farm Boy Cavaliers have access to a horse and individual savings and investments, not to mention that families pledged to provide their sons wages for their work, would have
limited the organization’s popularity among boys from less prosperous families. All but the most progressive farm parents may have been intimidated, or even angered, by the financial requirements of membership.

Over the course of the existence of the Farm Boy Cavaliers, boys and girls had formed troops in approximately thirty states, and twenty-six troops existed at the time of its demise. It was largely a Midwestern organization, with the largest concentration of activity in Minnesota, Iowa, the Dakotas, and Ohio. But the organization also reached the west, with troops in Colorado and Montana, and the south, with troops in Tennessee, Missouri, Virginia and Texas. The organization was far more popular with boys than with girls, although two troops of Home Cavaliers joined the organization. In the late 1920s, compared to other growing organizations for farm youth, the Farm Boy Cavaliers remained small, far smaller than its founder had hoped.69

In the late 1920s, time ran out for the organization. In 1928, problems with funding caused Dexter Mayne to discontinue the Farm Boy Cavaliers. To a youngster hoping to organize a troop he wrote, “it is impossible to continue the organization as a national organization on account of the expense. We shall be glad however to aid any local troop in any way that is possible by sending that material we have left. I am therefore sending you some literature that may be helpful to you.”70 Although the University had been enthusiastic and supportive at the organization’s inception, that did not guarantee continued funding over more than a decade and several university president’s administrations.71 Mayne, the organization’s founder and primary cheerleader, became ill and died in 1929, leaving the Farm Boy Cavaliers entirely
rudderless. While individual chapters may have existed into the early 1930s, they no longer had a larger institutional structure to support their efforts.

As an organization, the Farm Boy Cavaliers of America was a failure. The organization could not maintain its funding as the University of Minnesota withdrew its support. Mayne also neglected to cultivate new leadership, so the program could not survive his death. In fact, one of his early advisors, T. A. Erickson, left the Farm Boy Cavaliers for a long and distinguished career with 4-H. But even with ongoing funding and leadership, the Farm Boy Cavaliers would have faced a long, uphill battle to wide scale acceptance. Parents were reluctant to make the kind of investments in youth projects that the Farm Boy Cavaliers required. Even the somewhat less ambitious 4-H program ran into trouble when it came to cultivating independence in rural youth. As T.A. Erickson explained,

> We couldn’t even get to the point of breaking ground without first selling the idea that a boy or girl could be trusted to undertake even part of a man’s or woman’s job. Fathers were reluctant to risk money for projects, or unwilling to lend land for fear it might be wasted. The young people themselves lacked confidence, and initiative in anyone not yet of age was not considered much of a virtue. A boy who would draw a pail of water from the hand pump without argument was then considered preferable to a boy who wanted to construct a windmill.

Historian David I. MacLeod, in his book *The Age of the Child*, argued that 4-H created tensions within the family, because it required “each member to pursue an individual project entirely separate from the family’s overall farming operations and then compute
the profit exactly.” This, he said, “created a sense of personal entitlement antagonistic to the corporate (often patriarchal and exploitive) ethos of the farm family economy.”

If parents were uncomfortable with 4-H, with its individual projects and prize money, the Farm Boy Cavaliers had to be downright frightening, with the organization’s implications for the financial independence of the rural young. The Farm Boy Cavaliers, even more openly than 4-H, were an “‘entering wedge’ to reform and standardize on-going farming and animal breeding practices,” even to the point of reforming rather intimate details of family financial planning.

Failures are instructive, in that they help us to understand the limits within which reformers work. Reforming agricultural education in the first years of the twentieth century was a daunting task. Agricultural schools came and went, but those that survived generally provided youngsters a set of skills recognizable to their parents, while allowing children to remain close to home. Those programs that succeeded often were as much a “continuation of tradition,” as a new departure in agricultural instruction. The 4-H program struggled, but eventually succeeded, due to strong backing by the federal government, and a plethora of programs that could be tailored to an individual family’s and child’s skills and resources. While 4-H required youngsters to control their own projects and some resources, it did not necessarily require them to control cash or to be paid for their labor. Additionally, 4-H was down to earth and familiar, lacking the fanciful elements of the Farm Boy Cavaliers.

The Farm Boy Cavaliers, far more than 4-H, pressed the limits of parents’ comfort. Dexter Mayne sought to bring together a host of progressive ideas about rural reform into a single organization for the nation’s farm boys and girls. Along the lines of
4-H, he tried to create an organization that rewarded boys and girls for learning the latest and most successful techniques in agricultural production and home economics, and if necessary, allowed them to teach the material to themselves. While adult leadership was recommended, it was not required. He sought to extend their learning into service, by asking them to meet some of the most pressing infrastructural needs in their communities. He hoped to make the process alluring and enjoyable by incorporating a strong element of chivalry into the organization’s trappings, increasing the organization’s entertainment value. Perhaps most interesting, and most problematic from a parent’s point of view, was the organization’s emphasis on economic education, and its insistence upon parental endorsement of and participation in this goal. Unlike any of the other agricultural organizations for youth, the Farm Boy Cavaliers demanded that parents provide boys capital, in the form of land, livestock, and wages, and demanded that boys be allowed to keep and invest the fruits of their labor. Just as revolutionary, the organization demanded that girls be allowed to keep and invest their proceeds from economic endeavors as well. Mayne argued that this did not represent a challenge to parental authority, but an enhancement of their children’s opportunities to grow and prosper, in turn implying an opportunity for the continuation of their family farming enterprises. Mayne looked the “boy problem” and the “girl problem” squarely in the eye, and used all the tools of the progressive agricultural arsenal to craft a solution. The Farm Boy Cavaliers was a far reaching idea, meant to encourage the continuation of progressive family farming into the next generation. Unfortunately, Mayne was never able to muster the numbers or the funds to make his vision a reality, rather than a transitory and isolated effort at reform.
All of the records of the Farm Boy Cavaliers are in the Dexter D. Mayne Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota.

1 “Troop Doings Everywhere,” *Farm Boy Cavalier News*, January 1918, 6


4 “Why the Boys Leave,” *The Nebraska Farmer* (December 18, 1912), 1162.


6 “Are You Square with Your Boy?” *Kansas Farmer* (June 24, 1911), 3.


14 Henry, 310.


20 I have found only two published references to the Farm Boy Cavaliers of America, including a very brief comment about their participation in youth programs at the Minnesota State Fair, in Karal Ann Marling, *Blue Ribbon: A Social and Pictorial History*

The second is in an official history of the School of Agriculture at the University of Minnesota. Ralph E. Miller, The History of the School of Agriculture, 1851-1960 (St. Paul: University of Minnesota, Institute of Agriculture, Forestry and Home Economics, 1979), 46-47.

21 Andrew Boss, The Early History and Background of the School of Agriculture at University Farm, St. Paul (St. Paul: University of Minnesota, 1941), 75.


23 Goff and Mayne, 4.

24 Boss, 72.

25 Miller, 36.

26 D. D. Mayne, 1907, as quoted in Miller, 38.

27 Boss, 78.

28 Boss, 78-84.

29 David I. MacLeod’s reasonable estimates of farm children’s work in turn of the century America help to explain parental reluctance to send children far from home. He argued that by age twelve, most farm children probably worked about 1,753 hours per year, “approaching the equivalent of an adult work year in the 1990s.” David I MacLeod, The Age of the Child: Children in America, 1890-1920 (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), 106.

30 Mayne’s agricultural entrepreneurship extended in many directions. In the immediate post-World War I period he helped provide agricultural education for disabled veterans

31 “Professor M. V. O’Shea of University of Wisconsin Approves of Farm Boy Cavaliers,” *Farm Boy Cavalier News* II, 6 (August 1917), 1.

32 *Preliminary Announcement of Farm Boy Cavaliers: An Organization of Farm Boys Mounted on Horses*, 5. Undated pamphlet, Folder 1, Printed Materials, Dexter D. Mayne Papers, Manuscripts Collection, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota. (Hereafter, Mayne Papers.) Although titled “Preliminary Announcement,” this booklet served as the handbook for the Farm Boy Cavaliers throughout their existence.

33 *Preliminary Announcement*, 3-4. Mayne may very well have been keeping an eye on the Boy Scouts in this respect too (and might even have had a copy of their handbook on his desk while formulating the Cavaliers). The 1916 Boy Scout Handbook includes a whole chapter on chivalry, and traced the Boy Scout ideal back to King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. John L. Alexander, “Chivalry,” in Boy Scouts of America, *The Official Handbook for Boys*, 320-321.

34 Horses added to the mobility of farm boys, making it easier to bridge the distance between farms. It also, no doubt, added to the appeal of the organization. *Preliminary Announcement*, 31.

35 *Preliminary Announcement*, 10.

36 *Preliminary Announcement*, 10; “Thrift,” *Farm Boy Cavalier News* II, 6 (August 1917), 1.

38 “Round Table,” *Farm Boy Cavalier News* II, 6 (August 1917), 4.


40 *Preliminary Announcement*, 3.

41 *Preliminary Announcement*, 3.


43 *Preliminary Announcement*, 2-3.


46 *Preliminary Announcement*, 5.


50 This emphasis on documentation, and the “history” of a project is very much like that found in 4-H. See Gabriel Rosenberg, “Cultivating History: Historical Thinking and

51 Preliminary Announcement, 12-28.

52 Preliminary Announcement, 11-12.

53 Preliminary Announcement, 11-12.

54 Leland Peterson, Informal history of Farm Boy Cavaliers Troop No. 1 of Iowa, Mayne Papers, Folder 3, File 3, Miscellaneous Papers.

55 Leland Peterson, Informal history of Farm Boy Cavaliers Troop No. 1 of Iowa, Mayne Papers, Folder 3, File 3, Miscellaneous Papers.


57 Miller, 14-23, 117.

58 Mayne Papers, Folder 3, File 3, Miscellaneous Papers.

59 Mayne Papers Farm Boy Cavaliers of American: An organization of farm boys mounted on horses, 1, undated pamphlet, Folder 1, Printed Materials.

60 Mayne Papers Farm Boy Cavaliers of American: An organization of farm boys mounted on horses, 1, undated pamphlet, Folder 1, Printed Materials.

61 Preliminary Announcement, 33.

62 Preliminary Announcement, 32-33.


64 I would like to think that girls who would join an organization called the Farm Boy Cavaliers might be a bit adventurous in their activities, but the information is sadly lacking.
There is no evidence of Mayne’s ideas on race, and no language in the organizations papers to indicate if he envisioned this as a color-blind organization. There is also no evidence of African American boys or girls belonging to the organization.

Daniel Cain to D. D. Mayne, July 21, 1917, Mayne Papers, Folder 2, Correspondence.

Dale Catchpole to Leland Petersen, November 18, 1916, Mayne Papers, Folder 2, Correspondence.


Mayne Papers, List of Troops, Folder 3, Papers, Miscellaneous.

D. D. Mayne to Ray J. Liefer, October 11, 1928, Mayne Papers, Folder 2, Correspondence.

At the time of the organization’s founding, University of Minnesota President George E. Vincent promised to do all in his power to promote the organization. Miller, 46.


Erickson, 85.

MacLeod, *The Age of the Child*, 118.


For an excellent discussion of turn of the century agricultural education, and those characteristics that marked successful programs, see Shoemaker, 87-99.