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Durham County Cooperative Extension Service Celebrates a Century of Improving Lives

Empowering people. Providing Solutions. This is the mission that the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service has met head on for a century. Charged with the task of improving the lives and prosperity of an agrarian society the passing of the Smith-Lever Act in 1914 eventually placed Extension Agents in every county throughout the United States to provide reach-based knowledge and education from the federally funded land grant universities. In North Carolina, Extension agents presented economically relevant resources specific to their individually assigned counties from North Carolina State and North Carolina A & T State Universities. Today, agriculture makes up about 21% of the state's economy and 20% of the job market. As farm practices have become more efficient and rural families have thrived, Extension education has branched out to serve all North Carolinians, urban and rural alike.¹



Durham County Extension Homemakers, canning home grown garden produce, 1930s



NCSU Rare & unique Digital Collections, circa 1920

Though the Smith-Lever Act officially authorized the Cooperative Extension Service, the North Carolina farm extension program had been active in Durham County since 1911 when the county board of commissioners employed J. D. Fletcher as the county's first farm agent. Concerned with crop production, the county commissioners hired Mr. Fletcher, noted as the top county corn grower, to help local farmers improve their crop yields. By 1915, county commissioners saw a need to improve food preservation standards and hired the first home demonstration agent, Beulah Arey Eubanks, to serve farm women and girls. The first African American home demonstration agent, Mattie N. Davis, was hired in 1917 to address the needs of the rural African American community.² In addition to improving the welfare of rural families, extension agents also heeded the campaign from the US Department of Agriculture to support the war effort by mobilizing Durham County communities to produce and can 94,672 containers of fruits and vegetables which were sent to feed World War I troops.³ When influenza ravaged communities in 1918, extension personnel organized rural communities into nursing squads to distribute food to the sick.⁴

Empowering People.

In the 1920s extension home demonstration agents organized a county council of 20 home demonstration clubs, consisting of 745 women.⁵ Agricultural agents continued their work with farmers to increase food production through efficient farming and marketing strategies. Both the home demonstration and farm agents promoted youth entrepreneurial and leadership development with oversight to organized 4-H corn and tomato clubs. Under guidance from Extension, county homemakers prior to the Great Depression started the first county curb market, the forerunner to today's farmer's market, and through a partnership were housed in the building of the newly established Farmers' Mutual Exchange. When the Depression hit, farm families were positioned to weather economic adversity with profits earned from the weekly market.



4-H Achievement Night, Durham County 4-Hers, 1962



Durham County Curb Market, Opening Day, 1947

During the thirties as the Depression became entrenched in the economy, curb market sales sustained farm families. Farm agents encouraged sustainable agricultural practices by educating farmers about nutrient and soil management. Terracing farmland was introduced as a way to combat erosion. Land use committees were setup toward the end of the decade as concerns grew about best farm practices for land and soil conservation.¹ The 4-H program grew to nineteen community clubs and a joint 4-H county council was created to promote the growing community involvement of the 4-H program. Because of her 4-H project success, Pearl Nichols Williams was awarded a trip to broadcast for the *National Farm and Home Hour* in Washington, D.C. which was graciously funded by Durham County Home Demonstration Clubs.⁶

War World II took precedence in America during the first half of the forties. Agricultural and home economics emphasis was on all out food production and food preservation in an effort to support US troops. Extension Homemakers, currently known as Extension Community and Association volunteers, and 4-H'ers raised victory gardens and held scrap metal drives to contribute to the war efforts. The Durham County Curb Market, now a local institution attracting over 1000 customers a month, continued to prosper becoming and remaining the state's top grossing curb market for nine consecutive years from 1942-1951.⁷ Because of the success of the market Extension Homemakers petitioned county commissioners for a county agricultural building which opened in 1947.⁸

Providing Solutions.

As the War ended and returning soldiers opted to go to school or look for new opportunities away from the farm, farm labor shortages became a problem. The farm population dwindled from 1940 through 1982 from 50% of North Carolinians to 5%. Extension Agricultural agents worked to offset the labor shortage by helping farmers adopt technologies such as mechanized planters and harvesters, commercial fertilizers and hybrid seeds. Eventually, technology and other improved practices increased farm output. For instance, in 1950 the average U.S. farm fed 27 people, but today, the average farm can feed 155 people.⁹ Family and Consumer Sciences agents helped Extension Homemakers address domestic health and safety issues through a campaign that led County Commissioners to improving county roads by indentifying roads, putting up road posts, and naming rural roads. In communities, Extension educational programs promoted Tuberculosis screenings, taught basic first aid skills, and addressed home safety issues. With the birth of baby boom generation, youth programs became a major emphasis and 4-H become the number one youth organization in the county, state and country.¹⁰



*Durham County tobacco farmer,
A. M. Hall, 1988*



Durham Extension Director, Carl Hodges, with Local Corn Producers

The sixties saw the social landscape change. Urbanization began taking hold in Durham with the development of Research Triangle Park founded in 1959 and well underway by 1965. Most of the original 4,000 acres incorporated in RTP was previous Durham County farmland. The Durham County Extension Service led the Agriculture and Community Improvement Committee of the Northern Central Area Development Association to address conflicting agricultural concerns relating to development. Additionally, the Cooperative Extension Service served as a model for inclusion as county offices, homemaker and 4-H clubs integrated. In 1971 Durham County Cooperative Extension Service hired the first African-American County Director in the state, Carl Hodges, and in 1973 the Durham Extension Homemaker County Council elected its first African-American President, Mrs. Arthur Dennegan.

When the inflation rate hit double digits, and interest rates ran as high as 20 percent in the 1980s, a resurgence of traditional Extension programs related to foods and nutrition, clothing, family resource management, housing and home furnishings became popular with both urban and rural families. At the same time, tobacco production was in the midst of a 30 year decline which ultimately saw its presence occupying 22 % of the economy drop to only 7% by 2007. Extension was instrumental in helping farms transition from tobacco production to alternative crops. As the population continued to stream into the city, more homeowners called on Extension for landscaping and plant information. To accommodate both urban and farm horticultural needs, Durham Extension agents, Toby Bost and Carl Matyac organized the Master Gardener Education program, implemented through trained Extension volunteers. Now in its 25th year, Master Gardeners answer about 7000 gardening related questions a year from county residents.

Explosion in information technology brought new opportunities for Extension to reach non-traditional audiences. Seeing the internet as an invaluable resource, the N.C. Cooperative Extension launched the nation's first university Extension website that included customizing statewide county websites to ensure content catered to specific county needs. Thousands of Durham residents have had daily access to relevant information on topics ranging from agriculture to family nutrition and resource management for over 21 years. The effects of urbanization and development caused much public concern for natural resources and water quality. The Extension Neuse Education Team implemented innovative educational approaches in Durham County that improved the water quality and reduced nitrogen by 30% in the Neuse River basin. When Hurricane Fran hit the Triangle in 1996, Durham County Extension staff was on hand to help with emergency management and go door-to-door to provide trustworthy recovery information. Agriculture agents helped farmers manage distressed crops and livestock. Family and consumer sciences agents helped families understand how to put their damaged homes back together.⁹



Durham 4-Hers planting herbs, 2010

The dawning of the new millennium afforded the Durham County Extension Service new means in which to meet the relevant needs of Durham families through traditional and non-traditional programming. Through an alliance incorporating Welcome Baby into Durham County Extension, families with infants and young children up to age 5, receive applicable research-based parenting education and assistance for raising confident and thriving children. Grant opportunities helped Extension incorporate the Parent Family Advocacy and Support Training, Kids Voting, and Project BUILD into its programming for promoting productive parent-school partnerships, engaging youth in civic responsibility, and accessing collaborative support services for at-risk-youth. Concerns of obesity, an aging population and financial stability resulting from the 2007 recession brought revitalized interest in traditional Extension programs for assisting families learn to make wise and affordable food decisions, address issues of caring for elder adults, and integrate sound financial strategies into family budgets that offset external economic conditions. Continued Extension support to the 256 existing county farms and renewed public interest in locally grown foods and has brought agricultural education full circle. And once more, Durham County 4-H youth continue to gain the leadership and citizenship skills needed to become tomorrow's generation of industrious adults and leaders.

Learning from our history, understanding today's needs and encompassing both present and future research-based innovations, Durham County Cooperative Extension is well poised to continue its mission of improving the quality of lives for Durham families for another century by: *Empowering People. Providing Solutions.*

Written by Deborah B. McGiffin

Durham County Extension Agent, Family & Consumer Sciences

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References:

¹ <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/history/>

² Pace, W. B., & Sutton, J. A. (County Farm Agent Report, 1939). County Administration Has Been Working with and for Farmers for nearly 30 Years. *The Durham Herald-Sun*.

³ McKimmon, J.S. (1919). *Report on Home Demonstration Work and Girls' Clubs*. North Carolina Agricultural Extension Service.

⁴ Hammett, W. S., Christensen, J., & Gosper, J. (2011). *Ordinary women extraordinary service*. Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Family and Consumer Sciences Foundation .

⁵ Bryan, R.E. (personal communication, April 23, 1982).

⁶ Stanton, V., (1939). *Home demonstration program in Durham County*. Unpublished county report.

⁷ Ready cash from curb market sales. (1953). *The Durham Herald-Sun*.

⁸ Curb Market, vital to farm families, is badly in need of space. (1941, May, 11). *The Durham Herald-Sun*, p. II-8.

⁹ <http://ncce100years.ces.ncsu.edu/timeline/>

¹⁰(1953). *History of home demonstration work in Durham County*. Unpublished county report.

