

For Mervin Peifer 4-H Has Been a Lifelong Career

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Lancaster County is joining Pennsylvania in celebrating 4-H Week from March 18-25, recognizing the largest volunteer organization in the world. The greatest strength of the program is its volunteer leaders and the dedication they show year after year.

Mervin Peifer, R1, Manheim, completed his 29th year as a 4-H leader, and, like many leaders, he began his 4-H career as a 4-H'er himself. When some neighbors called upon him to help with the Lititz-Manheim Club as a leader he agreed, and his work as a 4-H leader began. He first helped with corn and tobacco projects but has now become a very skilled leader of the capon project. He presently serves as a leader with the Elm-Penryn Club.

Mervin recalls, "Community clubs used to consist of mainly agricultural things, but now they have everything under the sun. They are more diversified than they had been."

The wide diversity is fine with Mervin as he explains, "If you have enough leaders to take care of it, there is nothing wrong with it. It is not just agriculture anymore; it is also suburban and city." At this point Merv's wife Emma Ruth chimes in, "That's why I was never a 4-H'er." She laughingly points out that she grew up in the "city" of Manheim so being a 4-H'er was never a consideration for her.

Being a 4-H leader is seldom an isolated role, and in this case Emma Ruth is very supportive. "I help out when needed. I do enjoy helping," she says. The three Peifer children, Linda Esbenshade, Susan Hess and Mike, were all all 4-H'ers and from having children in the club, Merv knows the importance of parental involvement.

"If a kid doesn't have parental aid he has to struggle. If his parent is behind him it makes all the difference in the world," Merv says. The amount of support from parents hasn't changed much over the years. As Mervin puts it, "A certain portion of them give you

support."

What does 4-H offer the young person? "It is the experience they get - the training, the responsibility," Merv replies. "There is a lot of experience that is 'free.' There is a lot to be learned and if you have a good instructor you can go a long way."

Both Peifers cited the 4-H exchanges, the opportunity to travel to Penn State and other opportunities as good reasons to remain active in 4-H.

A big change over the years has been the increased responsibility of the leader in the projects. Merv says, "County agents used to do all the scoring. Now leaders do that. Leaders play a bigger role in 4-H now than they used to."

Mervin recalls when his girls had capon as 4-H projects and they had 50 capons on their farm. "I remember wondering what we would do with all those capons," he laughs.

Well, they took care of those 50 birds and now the Peifers market about 700 capons annually. At one point they had as many as 1100, but have decided that 700 is about optimum.

Usually the Peifers market 80 percent of the birds dressed, but with the arrival of the avian influenza in Lancaster County, he was required to sell them all dressed this year. Dressing that many birds is no problem, but it did keep the whole family working to fill the orders at Thanksgiving and Christmas.

The Peifers market the capons both wholesale and retail and have customers who return year after year to get the birds, which many people prefer over other kinds of poultry. Mervin explained that the birds average from nine to 12 pounds at the time of dressing, and he adds, "The advantage over turkey meat is that it is a moister meat and there is a lot of white meat."

Of course it is not surprising to find the Peifers have several freezers full of the capon meat, and when asked how they like to eat it, Merv said, "You name it and we do it with capon meat."

Round-up for the 4-H capon projects has traditionally been held in



Sitting at the kitchen table, with plaques from the Farm Show hanging behind them, are Mervin and Emma Ruth Peifer look through a 4-H file as they prepare for the 1984 4-H year. Mervin is currently a 4-H leader for the Elm-Penryn Club.

conjunction with the Lancaster Kiwanis Club meeting. In recent years through the interest of Clarence Keener the Manheim Rotary expressed a desire to do something for 4-H, and offered a show and auction to members in the Manheim area. Eventually it expanded to include the Lititz Rotary, and it offers a nice opportunity for the 4-H'ers to market some of their birds.

Mervin recalls that one man helped bid the price of a capon up to \$20, and although he was not the successful bidder, he thought that meant \$20 per bird, not per pound! Last year the winning bird brought \$16 per pound. According to Merv, this kind of auction "gives the kids something to work for."

Although some feel competition should be de-emphasized, Mervin says, "Competition creates interest. They have to try harder."

Children who take the 4-H capon project not only learn to raise the birds, but also how to dress them for market.

Since the class was initiated in 1978, Merv has displayed his expertise in the "best dressed capon" open classes at the Pennsylvania Farm Show. Each year he enters one bird in his name and one in his wife's, and each year he has come home with a wooden plaque for taking first place. What does it take? "You have to spend a little extra time. We semi-scald the birds," he states.

Usually the Peifers dress just two capons to enter, although this year they were forced to do a third one when they found that one they had selected has a blemish on its wing.

Merv says it's too soon to tell what effect the avian influenza will have on this year's capon project. "It's a question I can't answer," he says candidly. "I am hoping to go another two months before we say yes or no. I hope in that length of time we can get a green light. There will be capons, but whether there will be a 4-H capon project we don't know."

The Peifers flock did not contract the ailment. He said, "Thankfully it did not seem to affect small flocks." The bulk of his capons were gone by Christmas and he will not be getting chicks until June.

During those years of slowly increasing his capon flock, Mervin was also milking cows. He said, "I milked cows for 40 years. I had to cut down and four years ago I sold the cows. I miss my cows." With a smile, he adds, "I don't miss the work."

Mervin is the fourth generation of his family to live at their present location at the tip of Manheim Township. Their historic home, built in 1792, sits over the spring which is the beginning of the Little Conestoga Creek. The farm, designated a Century Farm a few



Mervin Peifer looks through his 4-H files in the kitchen of his farm home in Manheim Township. Mervin has completed his 29th year as a leader, working primarily with capon projects.

years ago, is in a very picturesque setting.

In addition to being a project leader, Merv has served four years on the 4-H Leaders Advisory Council, formed four years ago to advise and assist the Extension office in carrying out 4-H programs. One of the Council's big, on-going responsibilities has been to organize and carry out the 4-H Fair held each August as the culmination of the 4-H year.

Merv has severed on the food committee, and that first year, when the committee did the cooking and serving he could be found serving up pizza and other food from the Farm and Home Center kitchen. Emma Ruth was working beside him, just as hard. Now his responsibility is to line up

the food stands which are operated by 4-H clubs as fundraisers, and assist the clubs as they arrive. He says it goes a little more smoothly now, and about the Fair he says, "It takes some cooperation among the leaders or it will not materialize."

What is his biggest satisfaction over the years? Merv says, "If I can help a child. My motto used to be I'd rather see them with a smile on their face than a frown. You can't please them all, but when a child tries, your efforts are worth it."

Merv is modest about his accomplishments as a 4-H leader, but it is precisely because of people like him that the 4-H program throughout Pennsylvania is successful.



Having sold his dairy cows about four years ago, Merv still likes to keep some livestock on the farm. This is one of the few lambs that he raises each year. He also raises about 700 capons annually, but will not be getting them until June.

Homestead Notes