Leaders, 4-H'ers find first year of computer project a success

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LANCASTER — 4-H hasn't been just cows and cooking for a long, long time, but it continues to adapt to meet new demands. This year, for the first time, a project in computers was offered and was an immediate success.

"There was a great response as far as adult leadership," says Chet Hughes, Penn State Extension county agent. At least three community clubs expressed interest, although just two could carry it through because of the inability to schedule the use of computers through local schools.

The two that did offer the project, Mastersonville Community Club and Penn Manor Community Club, found more than enough willing 4-H'ers.

According to Hughes, there are two project books offered currently, and the project is designed to get the children used to computers, the hardware and the software, and make them comfortable with the terminology. Programming is discussed in the second unit, but Hughes says, "It's pretty simple."

Ruth Hoffer, organizational leader for Mastersonville Club, said she had to have one active list and one reserve list because of the demand. Since the high school computers were not available in the summer, Mrs. Hoffer found a leader who had computers in her home.

The recruited leader, Sherry Kraft, started with one group and plans to meet with the second group after Achievement Day. "I'm not a programmer. I'm pretty much a beginner. In fact, she says she was inspired to take a course at the Mount Joy Vo-Tech to stay a step ahead of the 4-H'ers.

She admitted that those with computers at home were able to go further than those with no access outside the project. She was pleased with the progress made in the six meetings, although said she may limit the age to 12 if she offers it again.

Dot Charles, organizational leader for the Penn Manor Club, succeeded in recruiting three teachers, and was able to use the computers at Penn Manor High School. Their time was limited because of others scheduled to use the room, so they met three times in six weeks to complete the course.

Sharon Fleming and Barb Kamen, both teachers at Conestoga Elementary School, volunteered after an informational letter was distributed in their school. Sharon, a fourth grade teacher said, "We have taught it in fourth grade, so the projects were well within their age brackets."

She adds, "We had a good time. We let them get started, and although we had a game plan, we found out it didn't go that way. It was better to let them work individually, and a couple stayed after the allotted time to go further."

Sharon expressed surprise at the number of kids who had computers in their homes, which made it much easier and more educational for the 4-H'ers.

Barb said that the course helped them become familiar with the keyboard and with any special keys on the computer. Both teachers are working on developing a curriculum for K-6 in their schools, and Sharon said, "The kids fight to come in at recess and play with the computers."
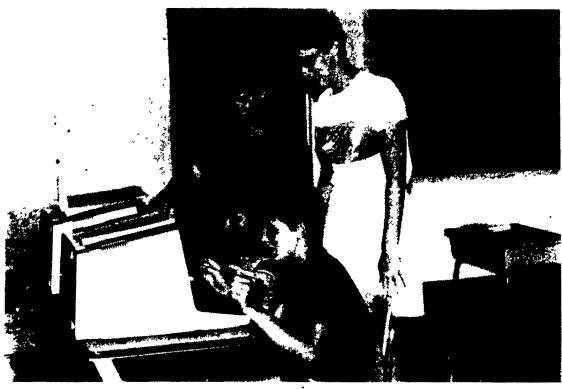
Ten-year-old Chris Coolidge owns a Commodore computer, and uses it primarily to play games, though his mother uses it for her work. He said he enrolled in the 4-H project because he wanted to learn more and believes it will help him when he gets to use computers in school. His other 4-H project was rocketry.

Eric Musser, 15, was interested in taking the project because he had used a friend's computer before the friend moved. "We did a lot of stuff in the project, and learned to put a time on it," Eric said. He added that his parents are "thinking about" getting a computer, so he'll be in a good position to put it to use. A member of the Penn Manor Club for 6 years, Eric has taken pet care, oil painting, and photography.

Thomas Black, another leader for the Penn Manor 4-H project, teaches computers to adults and found the 4-H'ers very responsible in learning to work with the equipment.

Hughes said more project books will probably be written for the computer, and the project will continue to be offered to interested clubs and 4-H'ers.

Since computers seem to be here to say, 4-H'ers can practice using the keyboard, learn the terminology and get a head start on the technology which they may need everyday in their future.

4-H leaders Barb Kamen, left, and Sharon Fleming help Chris Coolidge and Eric Musser, right, use the computers as they work from their 4-H computer project books.