**History of Kentucky 4-H Camps**

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Since it became part of the Kentucky 4-H experience, 4-H camp has created lifetime memories for thousands of youth. It’s funny how the very mention of 4-H camp evokes a smile--tales of singing around the campfire, nature hikes, classes, creepy sounds in the night, polar bear swims, Sally down the Alley, poison ivy, fishing, meals lines, camp clean-up, lost underwear and a few other pranks that hovered just under the agents’ radar, but best of all, fast friendships that have spanned a lifetime. The facilities have changed over time but the fun hasn’t.

In 1912, arrangements were made with the State Fair Board to hold a boy’s camp at the state fair. Under the arrangement, boys who had excelled in club work were to be appointed by the Superintendent of Extension to attend the camp with expenses paid by the State Fair Board. About 100 boys attended that first camp. On several of these occasions the University made a contribution of $600 toward expenses.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The Kentucky 4-H camping tradition, as a forerunner to current camping, began as do many significant things in life, in a very humble way in 1920. In that year Laurel County camped 38 boys and 44 girls, Daviess County, 61 boys and 43 girls and the state fair encampment involved 84 boys. According to “Kentucky History of 4-H Clubs” (perhaps written in 1959 for or by Mr. J.M. Whitehouse), “It was during the period of service of Mr. Buckler (1920-24) that county vacation camps were popularized.”

In 1921, twenty-two “county camps” were held Monday thru Friday along creeks, on school grounds, cemetery lots, and fairgrounds or anywhere that space could be found. Simpson, Ballard, McCracken, Graves, Union, Henderson, Daviess, Nelson, Muhlenberg, Christian, Warren, Barren, Hart, Laurel, Lee, Knott, Perry, Breathitt, Morgan, Owsley, Powell, Lawrence and Boyd counties camped 1,793 youth, 106 adult volunteers along with 6,890 visitors. In the history of Warren County 4-H, agent John Swack recalled the twinkle in Milza Smith’s eyes as Smith recalled canoeing across the Barren River to camp out on the bluff for that week of 4-H camp back in 1921.

In the early days, before a boy or girl could attend a county camp they had to have their 4-H project up to snuff. Each camper brought from the farm such things as fresh garden vegetables, butter, flour, meal, cured ham and bacon, and live chickens, which were killed and fried at the camp site. The agriculture and home economics Extension agents who were responsible for the camps provided each camper with a list of food that was needed for meals. In addition, each camper brought their own bed sack filled with straw and a sugar sack containing a tin plate, knife, fork, spoon and cup. The camp fee was $1.50 per person to cover the cost of milk and bread. In order to keep things cool, a victrola box was buried in the ground and packed with ice. Restrooms amounted to holes dug in the ground surrounded by a wooden frame and covered with tarpaulins. At night, the sources of light were lanterns and a large bonfire. When the fire went out, the day’s activities ended and all went to bed.

The camp program was educational, recreational and inspirational. The staff, in addition to the local county agents, was composed of state specialists in such areas as beef, sheep, clothing and foods. Camp classes were all closely associated with agriculture and home economics. Each camp had four tribes and each tribe had a name and a totem pole. When the whistle blew, it was a race to see which tribe could line up behind their totem and become perfectly quiet first.

Beginning in 1929 and extending through 1941, district camps were held throughout the state. In 1929 there were twelve 4-H district camps throughout Kentucky, involving 90 counties, 977 boys and 1,123 girls for a total of 2,100 4-H campers, 252 volunteer leaders and 7,785 visitors. It was customary that each Thursday night parents and friends could attend camp for a chicken dinner, thus the large number of visitors. **More…** (pdf of Equipment and Supplies for Each Club Member Attending District Camp)

The district camps were held on properties not owned by 4-H. Most district camps were held at WPA camps, normal schools, Boy Scout camps and old sulfur springs health camps. The one major improvement was that the children did not have to bring supplies (foods and bedding) with them to camp.

In 1933 the J.M Feltner 4-H Camp was established at Manila, Kentucky in Johnson County. This camp, built specifically for the purpose of enriching the lives of the youth in Northeast Kentucky through a supervised summer camping program, served as a vital link in training both youth and adults. The camp functioned for a period of 43 years and served thousands of Northeast Area residents for 4-H and general camping, family reunions, and community homecomings.

The development of the Army Corps of Engineers Paint Creek Flood Control Reservoir brought about the closing of this facility in August 1975. Faced with not having a location for 4-H camping in the entire Northeast Area, concerned leaders organized a non-profit corporation and purchased an appropriate camping site at Bolts Fork in Boyd County, located near the Boyd, Lawrence, and Carter County lines.

The new location consisted of 50 acres of hill land, a large winterized lodge with dining and sleeping facilities, a swimming pool, and a bath house. It was owned by John and Ada Diederich and had served as a girls riding camp, named Irish Acres. The purchase price for this facility was $297,000. The Diederiches, in turn, donated $100,000 to the purchase price, leaving a balance of $197,000. Pro-rata funds were raised in the 10 counties and these funds, along with gifts and contributions from citizens and businesses and with remunerative funds from the Army Corps of Engineers, have made substantial progress in paying off the indebtedness incurred in the purchase of this facility. Irish Acres was renamed Diederich 4-H Camp and remained in use through June 2001. It officially closed in 2002.[[2]](#endnote-2)

**Resident 4-H Camps Owned by the University**

As interest in camp grew, permanent facilities were sought. During the 100 year history, the university has owned five resident camp facilities. Only four remain in operation in 2009.

**Robert Worth Bingham Memorial 4-H Camp (1941)**

The Robert Worth Bingham Memorial 4-H Camp was established in 1941 through a gift to the University of Kentucky of $10,000 from Mr. Barry Bingham, owner of the *Courier-Journal* and *Louisville Times*. Bingham provided the fund to establish this camp as a memorial to his father, Judge Robert Worth Bingham, who was very much interested in the improvement of agriculture and a more satisfying life on the farm in Kentucky.

Bingham 4-H Camp was located on Chaplin River in Washington County. It was 17 miles from Springfield and 23 miles from Lawrenceburg. The post office address was Willisburg. It was not on the main highway but on a country road which connected Highways 62 and 53 and was seven miles from Highway 62 and five miles from Highway 53. The county fiscal courts in both Anderson and Spencer Counties were cooperative and kept the road in good repair.

The camp consisted of approximately 10 acres of land and a large two-story frame building with 40 rooms. There were about 100 shade trees on the property. This property was originally known as Tatham Spring and was named for Sam Tatham, who owned the land on which the spring was located. The land on which the hotel was located was known as “the Island.” During high-water, it was completely surrounded by water from Chaplin River, a creek, and a slew which runs between the river and the creek.

The building was erected in 1896 by Judge I.H. Thurman and Mr. W. C. McCord of Springfield, Kentucky. The island originally belonged to Levi Carey. For many years the hotel at Tatham spring was run as a resort hotel and was very successful financially. The ownership of the property passed through several hands, including O.B. Carey, son of Levi Carey, who purchased the Tatham Spring building and property in 1910 for $2,000. After running it two years, he sold it to Dr. J.B. Yates for $4,500. He ran the hotel for about five years and sold it to W.M. Dedman. Mr. Dedman operated the hotel for about five years, during which time patronage began to go down. He sold the property to M.C. Cheatham and John Carey. They operated the hotel for a few years and sold it to Mr. J.W. Figg, who operated it for three years. Patronage had gone down, so it was not a profitable venture, and Mr. Figg discontinued the operation of it as a hotel. He died February 19, 1940.

The property was bought by the university from Mr. J.W. Figg and heirs for $4,500. The deed was recorded in the County Court Clerk’s Office in Springfield on January 4, 1941.

The year 1941 began a new era for 4-H camping in the Commonwealth. Under the leadership of M.S. Garside, state 4-H specialist, the decision was made to purchase the old Bingham camp as a 4-H Camp.

After many years of 4-H camping, the camp property was returned to the Bingham family in the 1960s, with appreciation for its use. In 2006, Bingham camp was back in the news when the old main building burned.

**West Kentucky 4-H Camp—Dawson Springs, Kentucky (1950)**

Discussions regarding the leasing of a 400-acre parcel of land at Dawson Springs began in 1947. The land was slated to become Dawson Springs State Park. Much of the negotiations centered around a 1935 deed which stipulated that if the site ceased to be used as a state park, it would revert back to the United States government, who had conveyed it to the state. In 1950, the land was procured by the University of Kentucky through a 99-year lease with the Commonwealth of Kentucky for use as a 4-H camp. In 1951, the Commonwealth of Kentucky gave the camp to the University of Kentucky.

The original facilities included a 14-acre lake with a beach and bathing facilities, bath houses and other structures. The funds needed to build a kitchen, dining hall and staff quarters were donated, by and large, by W.C. Sparks in honor of his father, William Ballard Sparks. The central camp building bears the name, Sparks Hall.

The 450-acre camp has a 14-acre fresh water lake. The buildings, athletic fields, recreation areas, roads and parking areas are situated on an approximately 20-acre area. The remainder of the area is utilized for environmental education and is bisected by several miles of trails. The camp serves 37 counties and has a camping capacity of 386.

Today, the camp’s facilities include an archery range, shooting sports range, basketball court, softball field, soccer/football field, [swimming pool with diving board](http://www.ca.uky.edu/agcollege/4H/camp/westky/westky_pics.htm#1), large modern dining hall, Sparks Hall (used now as a multipurpose meeting/classroom building), [a shelter house for small gatherings](http://www.ca.uky.edu/agcollege/4H/camp/westky/westky_pics.htm#2), a [pavilion](http://www.ca.uky.edu/agcollege/4H/camp/westky/westky_pics.htm#12), a [nature hut](http://www.ca.uky.edu/agcollege/4H/camp/westky/westky_pics.htm#3), a crafts room, a country store for souvenirs and snacks, [heated cabins](http://www.ca.uky.edu/agcollege/4H/camp/westky/westky_pics.htm#4) and bath houses, and a [horse arena](http://www.ca.uky.edu/agcollege/4H/camp/westky/westky_pics.htm#11). The lake creates opportunities for fishing, [canoeing](http://www.ca.uky.edu/agcollege/4H/camp/westky/westky_pics.htm#6), hiking, and wetlands studies. A state of the art challenge course program with seven [high elements](http://www.ca.uky.edu/agcollege/4H/camp/westky/westky_pics.htm#7) and twelve [low elements](http://www.ca.uky.edu/agcollege/4H/camp/westky/westky_pics.htm#8) are settings for exciting and highly effective leadership and teambuilding training. Evening programs can be conducted in its rustic campfire or singing areas. A full time on-site camp director position was added in 2006 to coordinate and supervise all programs at the camp.

**J.M. Feltner Memorial 4-H Camp—London, Kentucky (1955)**

In 1955, a group of lay leaders formed Feltner 4-H Camp, Inc., a nonprofit organization dedicated to the construction of a new 4-H camp. The group obtained a 99-year lease on 182 acres of land that is part of the Levi Jackson State Park at London.

The J.M. Feltner 4-H Camp was a memorial to J.M. Feltner, a Field Agent in 4-H Club work. A group of citizens in the area desired to erect a suitable memorial to this man who had devoted 27 years to serving the people of Eastern Kentucky. They chose to build the memorial in the form of a camp as there were no suitable facilities for conducting 4-H camps in the area. Feltner’s son, Conrad, served in several 4-H positions, including State 4-H Leader from 1970 to his retirement in 1978.

On May 15, 1960, the Feltner 4-H Camp, Inc., Board of Directors requested that the University of Kentucky assume the lease on the property. Some of the reasons cited: so the 4-H educational program could be safeguarded at all times; to make it possible for public money to be contributed toward building the camp; so that private donors who give money or materials could support a permanent educational institution; so that university personnel could lend full support to the movement and still be in keeping with their legal responsibilities to the institution and their duties in 4-H; and so that Extension could have complete freedom to carry out whatever type of camping program is developed for 4-H members. The transfer of the lease was approved by the Department of Kentucky State Parks. A Memorandum of Agreement for maintenance and operation of the camp between Feltner 4-H Camp, Inc., and the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service was drawn up and approved.[[3]](#endnote-3)

From 1955 to 1960, local supporters raised $50,000 to build a kitchen, dining room and water supply. Fund-raising for the camp was slow. Another $60,000 was raised between 1960 and 1963. Mrs. J.D. Crooks, widow of Dr. J.D. Crooks of Laurel County, gave $25,000 for the J.D. Crooks Arts and Crafts Building. Kentucky Utilities Company (Mountain Division) and Jackson County RECC, each gave $3,500 for cabins which were built in fall 1961. An additional six cabins were built from funds raised by counties.

A delegation met with Governor Bert Combs in August 1960. Gov. Combs had $2500 transferred to the Highway Department for construction of the lake. The dam was constructed as part of building a road into the camp. The project was completed in 1962 when the lake was filled.

J.M. Feltner Memorial 4-H Camp has facilities for 294 campers and instructors and serves 28 counties. This campsite is used extensively by local groups for family reunions and other gatherings when not being used by 4-H.

The campground is made up of a 1.5-acre lake for boating and fishing, shelter houses, hiking and nature trails, dining hall and kitchen facilities, bath houses and cabins for campers and instructors, restrooms, living facilities for the manager and his family, recreational equipment, tennis courts, and picnic areas. In the earlier years of camp, there were areas set aside specifically for workshops on electricity and handicrafts. Since Extension was instrumental in the formation of electric cooperatives to take electricity to rural Kentucky, camp was a great place for youth to learn about electricity.

During the early years, campers used the swimming pool at Levi Jackson State Park until a swimming pool was constructed at the camp in June 1983. The counties using the camp raised funds to cover the $202,000 cost of pool construction.

**North Central 4-H Camp—Carlisle, Kentucky (1966)**

According to Extension records, sites in Nicholas, Owen, Garrard and Scott Counties were considered as the location for a 4-H camp in the north central part of the state. The decision to work toward securing a site in Nicholas County was made on September 27, 1961, by a site selection committee.

The North Central camp, made up of 344 acres in Nicholas County, was purchased in 1962. Work actually began in April 1963 with grading of the site. By the end of 1964, most of the $295,000 allocated to be raised by the counties was in hand and major construction was under way. Governor Bert Combs was very supportive of this project and allocated money for the building of a road and two small lakes. Governor Combs dedicated the camp July 10, 1966.

The camp at Carlisle was established to offer improved 4-H camping experiences for the 4-H’ers of Central and Northern Kentucky who had been camping at the smaller and less equipped Bingham 4-H Camp in Washington County and at Camp Ernst, a YMCA facility in Boone County.

The camp has facilities for 342 campers and instructors and serves 35 counties. The campground includes two small lakes, a swimming pool, bath houses and cabins for campers and instructors, rest rooms, a caretaker’s home, living facilities for the manager and his family, dining room and kitchen facilities, nature trails, recreational equipment, a shelter house, and a multipurpose building. The camp was established in the mid-1960s when fear of nuclear attacks and preventative measures were an important part of Extension programs. The basement of the dining hall was designed as a bomb shelter and has served as a storm shelter during severe weather. In the early years, an area was set aside for workshops on electricity.

Beginning in the 1990s, the camp has been used heavily for environmental camps during the spring and fall. Thousands of mostly fourth through sixth graders have come to camp for a two-day overnight camp experience. The camps are a joint effort of the school systems and Extension. A bird-blind, bee hives, outpost camping site, wetland area, and additional nature trails were added to accommodate more nature sessions. An Extension position was added to coordinate the environmental camps and to assist other camp sites that had established similar programs.

A large log cabin was donated and reassembled on the property. Large fire places were added on each end of the first floor. When weather doesn’t permit outdoor cooking, the fireplaces are used to teach *Dutch Oven Cooking.*

**Lake Cumberland 4-H Camp—Jabez, Kentucky (1971)**

The Lake Cumberland 4-H Center at Jabez, Kentucky (Wayne County), covers an area of 1,500 acres. The 4-H camp has facilities for 373 campers and instructors and serves 21 counties. The University of Kentucky purchased 500 acres of private land from Osburn Decker and acquired a 100-year lease from the Corp of Engineers for the remainder.

The Lake Cumberland 4-H Center Corporation was formed by friends of 4-H in the area for the purpose of raising funds to finance construction. The corporation’s board was made up of two volunteers from each of the 20 counties that expected to camp at the location. Mike Layman served as President and J.T. Wilson, Treasurer. Several local people were involved in planning construction. Volunteer and corporation director Herman Schoolcraft, who lived in Somerset, and Ed May, 4-H agent in Casey County, were both very involved. Ray Scott, an engineer for East Kentucky Rural Electric Cooperative Corp, served as architect and engineer in charge of the camp’s design. Osburn Decker, who had owned part of the land, moved his newly constructed house to nearby property to make way for the camp. He was later awarded the contract to build the cabins. Each county was asked to raise a portion of the funds. Construction was expected to cost $1.25 million. The camp was expected to be completed in 1971.

The camp offers a wide range of facilities—cabins for campers and instructors with bathrooms, living facilities for the manager’s family, utility buildings, dining room and kitchen facilities, picnic areas, craft building, recreational equipment, and a swimming pool. In recent years, a high and low ropes challenge course was added with 15 low elements and five high elements.

Among the points of interest is six miles of shoreline on Lake Cumberland—areas for swimming, fishing, canoeing, nature trails with many tree species, and sites which serve as examples of plant and wildlife conservation and erosion control through use of ground cover/trees/plant succession.

Lake Cumberland is the only 4-H camp with a cave. The Kentucky Geological Survey from the University of Kentucky describes the cave as follows:

The cave, though small and unnamed, is probably the most unique geologic feature at the center. It is a simple conduit consisting of a single, water-dissolved and eroded passage developed along a set of vertical fractures in limestone of the Fort Payne formation. The greatest thickness of limestone in the camp area is found at this point. The cave is the result of the solution and erosion action of surface waters which were diverted to underground routes. The stream which formed it occupies the lowest level of the cave, flowing most of the year. In addition to the cave opening itself, scalloped walls, differential erosion due to differences in rock hardiness, and small potholes record the destructive action of running water on limestone.

The camp is used during the off season for football camps, family reunions and wildlife programs.

During 2008, the decision was made by Cooperative Extension administrators to merge Lake Cumberland 4-H Camp and the Kentucky Leadership Center. Since both have been maintained and staffed by Extension, combining the two allowed for more efficient operation of both. The name was changed to Lake Cumberland 4-H Educational Center to encompass both the camp and the center.

1. *Historical Sketch of Extension work in Kentucky by T.R. Bryant, Assistant Director, May 1939).* No information has been found on how many years past 1939 that this camp was held. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Northeast Extension Area’s Proposal for Fundraising to Improve Irish Acres 4-H Camp [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Letter from Fred Brockman to Dr. Ray R. Ranta which chronicled developments at J.M. Feltner Memorial 4-H Camp between 1955 and 1960. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)