

A Sponsor of Literacy: The 4-H Club and Everyday Writing, 1900-1930

CIARAN TRACE

Abstract: The activities of everyday writing and recording have long formed a part of membership in the 4-H club, and these activities are perhaps best documented by 4-H record books. Building on prior research into the 4-H movement, the role of the agricultural extension service, and rural life in the US in the 20th century, Trace's research examines the beginnings of the 4-H movement during the progressive era, with a particular focus on uncovering the role that written literacy played in the contests and the clubs for rural girls and boys that emerged during the first three decades of the twentieth century. The interdisciplinary framework of New Literacy Studies (which posits that the study of reading and writing is best understood in relation to the social, cultural, political, economic and historical practices of which it is a part) and Deborah Brandt's concept of "sponsors of literacy" are foundational elements of this research. The aim of this research is to document activities and events within the early 4-H movement where written literacy had a role, analyze the idea of the 4-H movement as a sponsor of written literacy (including examining the ways in which the written literacy practices of 4-H reflect changes in society during the period), explore the relationship of these organizational literacy practices to literacy practices that members of 4-H encountered at home and at school, and uncover what view of the world the 4-H movement was imparting to others through its early record books.

About the author:

Ciaran B. Trace trained and worked as an archivist in Ireland before moving to the United States to pursue a doctoral degree at the University of California, Los Angeles. In 2004, she joined the faculty of the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison where she worked as an assistant professor and coordinator of the Specialization in Archives and Records Administration. In 2010 she joined the faculty of the School of Information at the University of Texas at Austin.

As part of the study of material culture, Trace's research examines the relationship and intersection of people and everyday objects in society. Taking a largely qualitative, naturalistic and constructivist approach, her research focuses on the meaning that objects have for individuals, the role that objects play in negotiating and representing broader social relationships, and the skills, expertise, and knowledge of objects that people must learn and demonstrate in order to be recognized as members of particular communities. Part of her interest in studying everyday life lies in figuring out how people make the most of life, how people negotiate local situations, and what we all share in common to make this happen. Her interest in material culture covers four main areas:

- The nature, meaning, and function of everyday writing, recording, and recordkeeping (with a particular focus on organizational information creation and use, and the role of written literacies in the lives of children and young adults)
- Articulating the theoretical and conceptual foundations of a multidisciplinary area of research that studies the nature, meaning, and function of everyday documents and document work
- The study of how and why individuals and institutions collect material culture, and the intersection of material culture and information behavior
- The qualitative and historical study of archival work