

## **Roots of Home Demonstration**

Edna Westbrook Trigg (1868-1946) loved her job as principal and teacher in the Central Texas farming community of Liberty (Milam County). Late in 1911, an offer from the U.S. Department of Agriculture changed her career...and eventually put her name in the history books.

At the time, few people in the rural South canned food for winter use. To improve nutrition, the USDA decided to teach canning to farmers and homemakers by first teaching their children--through youth food canning clubs.

In 1908 a boys' corn club formed in Jack County and, shortly thereafter, another formed in Milam County. The USDA asked Mrs. Trigg to start a girls' tomato club in Liberty. First, she learned the basics of canning. Determined not to interfere with her school work, she used the school vacation in the summer of 1912 to organize girls ages 10 to 18. Soon, she had a dozen or so clubs countywide, with more than 100 members.

Each member cultivated one-tenth of an acre of tomatoes, selling part of the harvest, and saving the rest for canning. Canning supplies were so rare at first, that for demonstrations Mrs. Trigg had to buy already-sealed cans, open them, and re-solder them while the girls watched.

By August, a proud Mrs. Trigg and tomato club members exhibited their canned goods in nearby Milano before a curious crowd of 3,000, including Texas Gov. Oscar B. Colquitt. It was the first exhibition of girls' agricultural products ever held in the state. The girls exhibited at the State Fair of Texas in Dallas the next year and came away with \$100 in prize money.

Youth canning clubs proved so successful that they expanded nationwide after the 1914 Smith-Lever Act created the Cooperative Extension Service of the USDA. During the 1920s, boys' corn and girls' tomato clubs became known as 4-H clubs.

In 1916 Edna Trigg broke more new ground when she moved to Denton County to become the nation's first home demonstration agent. Traveling 1,000 miles a month,

she spread the word about canning and nutrition. During World War I, she launched a drive to make Denton County self-sufficient in food, and the county remained a top food-producer after the war. Mrs. Trigg also taught homemakers how to combat pellagra, rickets, goiter, and other diseases of malnutrition.

Edna Trigg died on November 15, 1946, and was buried in the I.O.O.F. Cemetery in Denton. In 1970 the Texas State Historical Survey Committee placed a marker in her honor on the courthouse square in Cameron, seat of Milam County. Another plaque there, dedicated in 1982, recognizes her girls' tomato clubs. In 1991 the National Agricultural Center in Kansas City, Kansas inducted Edna Trigg into its Hall of Fame as America's first home demonstration agent. And in 1998, as part of its 90th anniversary celebration, Texas 4-H recognized Mrs. Trigg for her pioneering work in rural youth education.

(Footnote: At 98, Zeta Gandy of Cameron remains the oldest surviving member of Mrs. Trigg's first girls' club and still enjoys home-canned tomatoes.)

Resources:

- Chris Holcombe, Milam Co. ext. serv (probably the best overall resource; holds Mrs. Trigg's memoirs)
- Handbook of Texas Online for Edna Trigg
- The story of East Texas agriculture: <http://overton.tamu.edu/htmlsub/history.txt>
- Texas A&M Agriculture News Service --*Jerold Summerlin, marketing*
- THE CONGRESSIONAL STAR--*Official Newspaper of the 1998 Texas 4-H Congress*, article by Laura Real, Public Relations  
<http://sanangelo.tamu.edu/four-h/congress/starmon.htm>
- National 4-H Council, Bridgette Johnson, marketing:  
history: <http://www.fourhcouncil.edu/4hinfo/NHISTORY.HTM>
- TAMU, 4-H Div., Gail Hall
- Natl. Ag. Hall of Fame, Cathy Hahner

•Texas Historian, Nov. 1971 (Jr. Historians)