



Photo Source: "Volunteer Hall of Fame."
Ohio State University Extension
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Photo Source: "Ohio 1954-55 Community Service
Guide. The Door to Public Affairs Discussions."
Community Institute CI-22. September 1954.

R. Bruce Tom
Jan. 28, 1890 - Aug. 4th, 1969

Extension Rural Sociology
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This sketch of R. Bruce Tom was written by Dr. Julie N. Zimmerman, Historian for the Rural Sociological Society and Professor of Rural Sociology at the University of Kentucky, March 2022. A diverse array of resources were identified, located, and examined to piece together his work and career. Unless otherwise cited, his biographical and genealogical information was obtained from the article in the Zanesville Times Recorder newspaper "A Look at the History of Camp Ohio" by Dorothy Montgomery July 15, 2018 (<https://www.zanesvilletimesrecorder.com/story/news/local/2018/07/15/look-history-camp-ohio/779931002/>).

R. Bruce Tom was born Robert Bruce Tom in Rich Hill Township, Muskingum County, Ohio in 1892. He married Bertha Eliza Harlan of Rural Dale Township and together had one daughter, Neva Mae. Throughout his professional career, he used the name R. Bruce Tom and fondly became known as "Uncle Tom" to his audiences in 4-H. He even used a signature with the nickname in an article he wrote for *National 4-H News* (Tom 1947:18).

R. Bruce Tom began his career in Extension as a 4-H Extension agent in Summit county. There, in 1919, he is credited with starting the first state 4-H camp in Ohio known as "Camp Ohio" (Christian [1959]:49). He later went on to serve on the Camp Ohio Board of Trustees (Ohio 4-H Youth Development [2022]).

It was in 1923 when he joined Ohio State University. He served as a Recreation Specialist in the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service and was housed on campus in the Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology. While sometimes he is referred to as a professor of rural sociology and other times he is referred to as an Extension specialist, it is clear that his work always focused on Extension. In fact, R. Bruce Tom spent his nearly 30-year long career working with the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service.

Within Extension, R. Bruce Tom focused on recreation. In 1927 he was among the "experienced leaders" who were "responsible for intensive study and discussion groups" at the second Recreational Institute held in Chicago (Holcomb 1972:37). In 1931, he served again, having been elected to a

committee to “guide” the fifth Social Recreation Institute (Holcomb 1972:40). In 1934, he organized the inception of the Senior 4-H Recreational Club of Clinton county, Ohio which grew to 150 members the next year ([No Author] 1936).

In 1937, R. Bruce Tom served on the advisory committee for the Ohio Study of Rural Recreation Leadership – a multi-study effort examining various aspects of rural recreation and the qualities, need, and range of leadership in rural recreation (Charters and Fry 1942:6). The impetus for the study came out of a deep concern about “the dearth of trained recreation leaders to carry on the WPA recreation programs” (Charters and Fry 1942:5).

In the 1940s, his focus on 4-H reached nationally as he served as one of the contributing editors for the periodical *National 4-H News*. Often referred to as “Uncle” Bruce Tom or “Uncle Tom,” he wrote articles on homemade puzzles (Tom 1947) and other recreational activities for youth (Tom 1948), as well as giving guidance on how to lead recreational activities. Scattered throughout the periodical, were reports from other states mentioning how they had used his techniques or resources. And, in 1949, he presented a session on recreation programs at the 4-H Leadership Development workshops held in 27 counties across Ohio (Harshfield 1949).

It is not clear how many Extension or other publications he authored, but citations to them include titles such as “Drama do's for Community Leaders” and “Some do's for Community Leaders,” copies of which can be found at the USDA National Agriculture Library. Others include “Recreation for 4-H Clubs and Other Groups” (Tom 1940), “Let's Play” (4-H circular no. 80), “Fun with Family” (1947 Bulletin), “Dances of our Pioneers” (Tom 1949), and “Discovering and Developing Leaders for Leisure Time Programs” that was published in the September 1937 of the magazine *Leisure*.

R. Bruce Tom's work reached beyond his own publications as he spoke on recreation, leadership in recreation, or guided recreation activities at many national, state, and local events across the country and in Ohio. As a result, for instance, his work was included in a monograph that brought together and clarified the nature of recreation as a field (Sloan 1949). Naming R. Bruce Tom among the key participants, the monograph grew “out of a quarter of a century of fellowship with workers in this field and especially with the Southwide Leisure Time Conference leaders in Nashville, Tennessee, from 1930 to 1940” (Sloan 1949:[i]; see also Brobeil 1940).

In Ohio, R. Bruce Tom is best remembered as the founder of The Buckeye Recreation Workshop program. This was clear in the description that was used when, in 1989, he was inducted into the Ohio 4-H Hall of Fame. As Montgomery (2018) notes, “Uncle Tom was the first Muskingum Countarian to be inducted.” The Ohio 4-H Youth Development website describes R. Bruce Tom this way:

“He was the founder of the Buckeye Recreation Workshop, which has been a driving force in the training of 4-H leaders for 45 years now. The Buckeye Recreation Workshop is one of the earliest and longest-running recreation labs of its type in the country. Today there are about thirty similar workshops held on a regular basis in the United States, all of which have had the Buckeye Recreation Workshop as a model. If ever a man had a living memorial, the Buckeye Recreation Workshop is a living memorial to R. Bruce Tom.” (Ohio 4-H Youth Development [2022]).

It was in an entry for the *Music Educators Journal* where Edith M. Keller described how the Buckeye Recreation Workshop got started. After some modest beginnings, in 1945 the first Community Institute

held at Hiram College organized the first Ohio Recreation Workshop. In a few short years, the name was changed to the Buckeye Recreation Workshop (Keller 1949). In 1948, the editor of *National 4-H News* reported on attending the “4th annual Hiram Recreation Workshop.” Noting how it had begun at Hiram College as a project of the Northeast Ohio Community Institute, it soon changed its name to the Buckeye Recreation Workshop ([Troeger] 1948:21). By the next year, as Keller described, six states were now “carrying on such training programs” including one lead by rural sociologist Arthur Wiledon at the University of Wisconsin and the first Extension rural sociologist in Iowa William H. Stacy (Keller 1949:59). In fact, a rural sociologist from Illinois noted how R. Bruce Tom’s recreation workshops were one of only a few that continued through the war years (Regnier 1949:12). By 1954, 150 people met for the one-week workshop in Urbana, OH (Holcomb 1972:87).

After attending the 1948 recreation workshop, the editor of *National 4-H News* playfully reported to readers about R. Bruce Tom’s impact on participants writing: “You had plenty of chances to [release pent up energy], for “Uncle” Bruce Tom, who has been teaching Ohio folks “homemade happiness” for 25 years had a tetherball pole on a standard that could be slid out in the center of the big church gym floor in a minute” ([Troeger] 1948:16). Indeed, “Homemade Happiness” is the title he used as far back as Thirteenth Ohio State Educational Conference held in 1933 on the Ohio State University’s campus ([No Author] 1933).

R. Bruce Tom’s retirement date is not clear. The 1954-55 Directory at Ohio State lists him as “emeritus” (Ohio State University 1954). It is known that as part of a day-long program on “Town and Country Recreation,” a banquet honoring R. Bruce Tom as “one of the pioneers in the rural recreation movement” was held at the 1950 National Recreation Congress (Champlin 1964:176).

R. Bruce Tom’s work continued to be included in works on recreation that were published near or after his retirement in the early 1950s. One was in *The Fun Encyclopedia* which was then subsequently used in the *Program Handbook for Army Service Club Personnel* to assist in providing recreational activities (U.S. Dept of the Army 1955). His work was also used in two different books written by Helen and Larry Eisenberg (1951; 1955) the latter of which was reprinted seven times with the final reprinting being in 1967. He even contributed a song “I want to be a Farmer” along with dance instructions that had originally been published in his “The Play Party Book,” for the Cadette Girl Scout handbook (Girl Scouts 1963:83).

It was in a resource guide for Community Institutes being organized by Ohio Cooperative Extension where information could be found on R. Bruce Tom’s work after retiring from Ohio State University. Containing a long list resources that could be used in county or other programs focused on “public affairs,” R. Bruce Tom was listed as among the resources available through the Grange. Alongside a black and white photograph of R. Bruce Tom with a smile, the description reads: “Mr. Tom has ‘retired’ as extension sociologist to become Ohio’s very active Lecturer of the Ohio State Grange” (Ohio Cooperative Extension 1954:23). In other places, it became clear that he also became chairman of the Ohio State Grange Health Committee, both participating and representing farm organizations at national conferences focused on rural health ([No Author] 1954a; 1954b:1059).

That R. Bruce Tom worked actively with the Grange after retiring is not surprising and, in some ways, brought him full circle. Soon after joining Ohio State University in 1923, it was in 1926 that he served as the Member in Charge of the Grange Improvement Contest Committee. The committee organized the first Grange Improvement Contest which resulted in six Granges being chosen “to make exhibits at the Ohio State Fair” (Vivian 1926: 57-60). The Ohio Grange also had a long relationship with Extension,

providing both a place for county agents to speak as well as training for Grange officers on campus. R. Bruce Tom was the key person planning and carrying out the “short course” offered at the Ohio State University campus each winter for the officers who were responsible for the educational programs at their Granges (Christian [1959]:30).

With a career spanning about 30 years at Ohio State University with the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service, R. Bruce Tom has been described as a pioneer in recreation (Champlin 1964:176). In the *National 4-H News*, the editors added a comment to a letter from him letting the readers know that ““Uncle Tom” is one of the great recreation leaders in Extension” (Tom 1952). When he was inducted into the Ohio 4-H Hall of Fame, he is described as having “dedicated his life and energy to helping people learn to interact together, develop relationships, and support each other... Bruce loves people - young and old alike” (Ohio 4-H Youth Development [2022]).

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