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Making Western heritage come alive

By Jim Cornelius
News Editor

Getting teenagers interested in their heritage is a lot like catching fish in the Metolius River. The quarry is cagey and elusive and it takes the right lure, perfect presentation and good technique to get them hooked.

A group of Montana historians associated with 4-H has put together all the elements to get kids hooked on their Western heritage. They were in town last weekend to help Deschutes County's 4-H launch a similar program focused on Oregon history.

The lure is Cowboy Action Shooting, a competitive sport in which shooters make timed runs, shooting reproduction 19th century-era firearms at steel gong targets on a Western-themed range.

"The kids join because they want to pull the trigger," says historian Todd D. Kesner, who is an educator with the Montana State University's Montana 4-H Center for Youth Development. But pretty soon, that boring old history stuff actually starts to get interesting.

"Something will pique their interest - maybe it's Custer, maybe it's their family history, and all of the sudden they're studying this stuff, with no push from us," Kesner said.

There is, of course, an initial push. Shooting competitions, which reward the fast and the accurate, also include a history exam and a period-clothing assessment. Each take time off your score. You can't be competitive without some history knowledge.

Todd Williver of Deschutes County 4-H brought the Montana folks in for a training session. On Saturday night, the educators gathered at Brand 33 Restaurant at Aspen Lakes for a slide presentation and a discussion of period-correct attire. They also reviewed a field guide prepared for the Montana Western Heritage Project, lavishly illustrated by documentary photographer and reenactor William Abbot. The field guide is an enticing overview of firearms, gunleather and attire of the frontier west in the 1860-1900 period.

The Montana crew is used to helping to pollinate heritage programs in other states. They've worked in Missouri and Texas and are heading to Alabama. The goal is to get as many states as possible engaged in creating among their youth an appreciation of their heritage.

"It's getting big," Kesner said. "It's really fun. We're getting close to being a national program."

The group, many looking as if they'd stepped out of the 19th century, trekked out to the Cyrus family's Alder Creek Ranch for a Sunday morning shooting session. Period firearms include single-action revolvers, lever action rifles and pump action or double-barreled shotguns. Firearms safety is a critical element of the program, with tight firing range protocols and close instructor and rangemaster supervision.

Kesner acknowledges that the program is currently very Anglo-centric, and he is keen to broaden the scope of "heritage" to include groups like the Chinese who played important roles in both Montana and Oregon during the frontier period, the black cowboys who made the epic cattle drives from Texas to Montana and particularly the Indian peoples for whom the "frontier" was their home range.

Kesner noted that he is developing relationships with native historians on the Crow and Blackfeet reservations in Montana in the hopes that they will tell their own story in the context of the program.

For more information on the program visit www.montana4h.org/#project:31.

For more information on Deschutes County 4-H visit <http://www.deschutes4h.com/>.



Kids come for the shooting and stay with an interest in history. photo by Katie Feinauer