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“Western shooters arrive here in town”

By Michael Stafford

They're here.

Yesterday on Tuesday, July 31 around 80 contestants and more than 200 people associated with the National 4-H Western Heritage Conference and Champion Shoot came to town or were already here by then for the start of the activities.

This is the first year the event has been in Deer Lodge and in the past it has taken place at Fort Benton and Branson, Missouri. Next year it will be held in California. The event brings members from 4-H shooting sports in at least five different states and possibly up to 11 states for a multiple day event that highlights not just shooting ability, but also history.

“The Western Heritage Project started here in Montana nine years ago with about six kids,” said Todd Kesner, Director of Montana 4-H Center for Youth Development.

Now with the project having expanded to many other states there are about 1,400 youths involved in it. Prior to the event which started on July 31 and will continue until August 2, Kesner explained to the *Silver State Post* a little bit about what the conference was to be about and how it combines both history and shooting sports. He said that the historical portion of it is a study of the west between 1860 and 1900.

Youth in the program will dressing period correct clothing during the event and have developed personas of individuals who would have lived in the west in the latter part of the 19th century. While they are here, part of the focus will be on learning history and Kesner said that Seer Lodge is a perfect location for that.

“We look for locations where that history component is really robust,” he said.

While the youths in the conference will be having a fun, they also will be competing. Half of their total score will be derived from history with 25 percent coming from an interview where they will explain their persona and historical aspects in front of a panel of judges and 25 percent from a test that will focus on local history. Kesner said that this year the heritage project is also zooming in on three aspects of western history- law enforcement railroads, and buffalo soldiers and those in the west of a minority race.

The second half of their total score will be derived from the shooting events.

“We are going to be at the St. Mary's Center for all the indoor activities and the Powell County Shooting area for the shooting activities,” said Kesner.

In the shooting activities and competitions, the youths will once again be in period costume and will also be firing period correct firearms meaning single action revolvers, lever action rifles and shotguns. Kesner explained that the setup will be at the shooting range where there will be the façade of wild west buildings and the children will have to shoot the mental targets therein. For the competitors the time is times and accuracy counts.

“They shoot as accurately as they can, but also as rapidly as they can,” he said.

That means having some discipline when it comes to the shootings as a miss could cost a five second penalty for the youth.

Kesner said that the public is welcome to watch the events at the shooting range as well as other activities, except for the interviews. He said that would add additional pressure to the interviewees and crowds could fluctuate causing unfairness.

The wrap up banquet of the events will take place on August 2 and the keynote speaker will be Dr. Quintard Taylor who is a retired professor of western history from the university of Washington. In a presentation about the event a few months ago it was noted one of the issues the program encounters is that minorities do not feel that western history is their history. Subsequently Dr. Taylor, who is a minority himself, will deliver an address about black history in the west with a focus on Montana. The professor will speak on how minorities played an important role in the west during the late nineteenth century.

Throughout the event there will be a variety of activities and some of the youths attending will also share demonstrations of skills and techniques from long ago.