



Image caption; **Scavenger Hunt**- From left, Tyler Taylor, Thomas Aquino, Raelynn Hagen, Brooke Doty, Josiah Tomaszewski and Jacob Gude pose on the Shep memorial statue as a part of a scavenger hunt kicking off the National 4-H western Heritage Project Conference Tuesday, Aug.1. The conference drew nearly 300 people to Fort Benton and continues through the week, wrapping up Friday morning. (Dominik Stallings photo)

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The National 4-H Western Heritage Conference and Invitational Shoot opened Tuesday, Aug.1 at the Montana agricultural center, with nearly 300 people in attendance and five states represented.

The conference allows 4-H competitors to participate in several events including a shooting competition, a scavenger hunt, visits to museums in Fort Benton and a costume presentation.

“You’re going to have yourself a blast,” said Todd Kesner, director of the 4-H Center for Youth Development at eh MSU Extensions Office in Bozeman.

Kesner said the convention consists of 50 percent shooting 25 percent consume presentation and another 25 percent of learning the local history of the convention’s location. These events add up toward a score for each competitor.

The 4-H Western Heritage Project was first stated in Montana in 2004 with only six kids, Kesner said. It grew year after year, and not students form 12 states participate in the project.

They held their first national conference in 2014 in Virginia City, Montana. The next two 4-H Western Heritage Conferences were held in Missouri, but they returned to Montana this year, selecting Fort Benton as the host. This week’s conference drew 90 4-H competitors from Montana, Colorado, Missouri, California, and Kansas.

The conference began Tuesday morning with a Competitor Parade, where each state’s competitors walked into the Ag Center, carrying a sign for their state. The entire room was filled with parents, competitors and organizers, who stood for the national anthem and the 4-H pledges.



Western History- A crowd of 90 National 4-H Western Heritage Project Conference participants leave the Montana Agricultural Center to head toward the Old Fort to participate in a scavenge hunt Tuesday morning. Most students dress

the part in preparation for an interview about their costumes and the history they've been studying. (Dominik Stallings photo)

Afterward, Kesner gave a short welcoming speech to all the competitors and handed off the microphone to Keith Ballantyne, the president of the Fort Benton Chamber of Commerce. Ballantyne spoke about the historical significance of the Fort Benton area. He also told stories of living in Scotland and how his time there helped him grasp the importance of Fort Benton's history and heritage. Ballantyne realized that although the U.S has a much shorter history compared to Scotland, many important events took place in our history that shaped the way we live today.

"In those 200 years, some of the biggest changes in history occurred," Ballantyne said.

Larry Cook, chair of the local River and Plains Society, also welcomed the competitors and gave a small history lesson about Fort Benton and how it has progressed through the eras.

"There's a colorful story after a colorful story," Cook said. After organizing the groups of participants into "posses," a scavenger hunt began, organized by Andera Rutledge of Big Sandy and Jordee Bomgardner of Loma. Rutledge is the president of the Montana State Ambassador Team and Jordee is the 4-H ambassador for Chouteau County.

Rutledge said it was their first time organizing a scavenger hunt, but they gave it a different spin than other scavenger hunts. There were eight different stations for the contestants along Fort Benton's river levee. At each station, the groups completed a task and picked a card to form a poker hand. Each team had to form a hand of five cards to determine who would win the competition, although no poker chips or money traded hands as a part of the scavenger hunt.

The scavenger hunt was designed to teach Fort Benton's history. The stations focused on historical events and sites, like walking bridge in Fort Benton, the story of Shep the loyal dog, and Lewis and Clark statue and several other places in Fort Benton, Rutledge said.

Chandler Johnson, one of the 4-H contestants from Missouri said he's been with 4-H for 4 years while staying at the bridge scavenger hunt.

“It’s my third year in the convention, but it’s my first time in Montana,” Johnson said. “It’s a lot less humid here than in Missouri.”

Johnson was in a group of nine for the scavenger hunt on Tuesday. He and several others in the group were surprised by how few people live in Montana and the Fort Benton community. He said the convention has been running smoothly so far.

“I can’t wait to get out on the (shooting) range!” Johnson said.

After the scavenger hunt, the groups went to lunch and attended a speech by Dr. Andrew Patrick Nelson, an assistant professor of film history and critical studies at Montana State University.

The groups left for a shooting complex near Great Falls after lunch to start shooting on the range and practice for the upcoming competition days.

In the evening, the participants attended a local history program with presentations by local historian Ken Robinson and Fort Benton native Randy Morger.

On Wednesday, Aug. 2, the contestants left for the range in the morning and started shooting for the competition until lunchtime. At the Community Bible Church Wednesday afternoon, contestants started doing interviews with judges. Kesner said the students would present their period costumes and explain the history and why they chose it. The costumes included cowboys’, farmers’, soldiers’, and women’s’, attire from the 19th century.

Contestants will finish up the shooting competition in the morning and the last of the interviews in the afternoon Thursday, Aug. 3. They have the opportunity to participate in a variety of workshops such as soap making and hide preservation, on Wednesday and Thursday. They’re also invited to explore Fort Benton’s museums during their stay.

Mark Hall-Patton, director of the Clark County Museum in Nevada, will be Thursday night’s keynote speaker at the evening banquet at the Ag Center. Hall-Patton is known for his regular appearances on the TV show, “Pawn Stars,” as an expert historian. The banquet will also include an awards ceremony.

The conference will wrap up Friday, Aug. 4, with a Montana Breakfast and more awards to be given out to contestants.