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Learning Frontier History **ONE SHOT AT A TIME**

The romance of the frontier west still lives in the hearts of many Americans. One up and coming 4-H Shooting Sports program plays on this nostalgia of the Old West to inspire in young people an interest in frontier history.

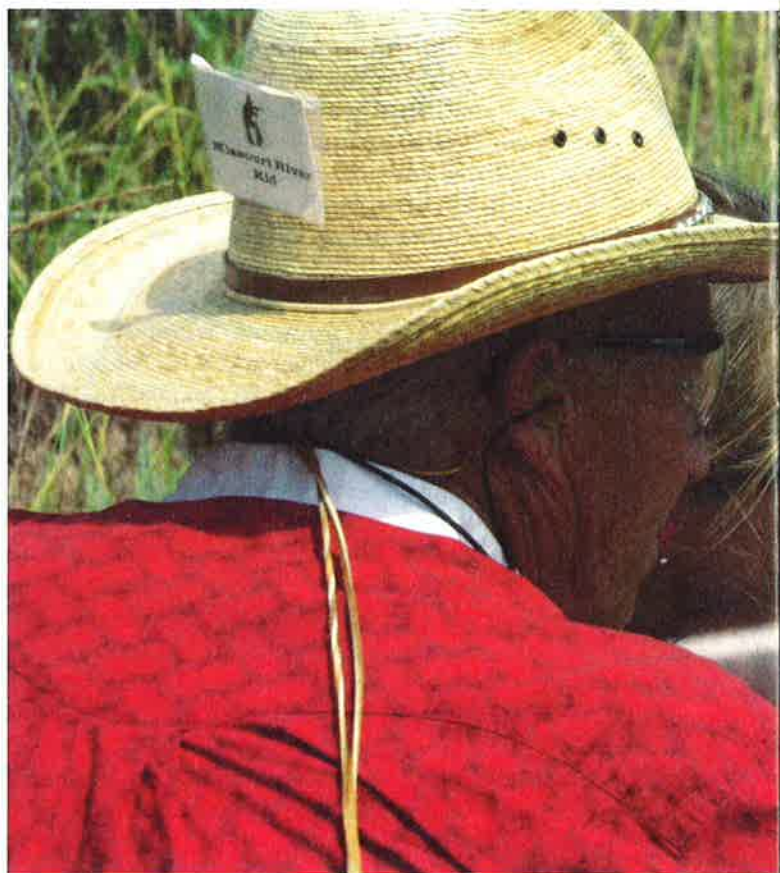
By Todd Kesner
4-H Western Heritage Project Program Creator and
Montana 4-H Center for Youth Development Interim Director

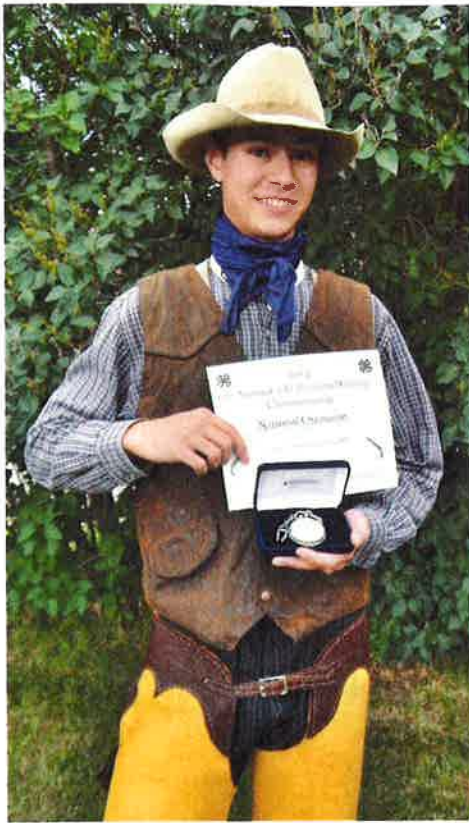
The dinging sounds of bullets hitting steel targets fill the air as a 4-H member dressed in period clothing works her way through an Old West façade. Welcome to the 4-H Western Heritage Project, a comprehensive study of the Old West combined with the fastest growing shooting sports discipline in the world—western action shooting. The project aims to provide an avenue for 4-H members and adult leaders to experience the lifestyles and cultures of the 1860 to 1900 period Old West while instilling the concepts of gun safety and personal responsibility.

The project started as a way to retain older 4-H members in shooting sports beyond the BB gun and air rifle years. After training a few adult volunteers and several 4-H members to safely participate in Western Action Shooting, it became apparent that the project had tremendous potential. It is an advanced and action oriented discipline that quickly evolved into an effective approach to teaching American frontier history. Members dress in Old West clothing, shoot replica firearms of the frontier period, and expand their knowledge of U.S. history through a living history approach.

Hands-on activities transformed the 4-H Western Heritage Project from a 4-H shooting sports program where youth learn a little history to a 4-H history program where kids get to shoot. Pilot research studies conducted by Montana State University Extension indicate an increase among participants in both interest in American history and feeling a relevant connection to the past.

What began with five teenagers in Montana in 2008 has expanded to Missouri, Texas, Oregon, Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, Alabama and Idaho. This growth and enthusiasm prompted the inaugural





PHOTOS Courtesy 4-H Western Heritage Project. Clockwise from bottom: A young Montana 4-Her steadies her 22 rifle under the watchful eye of the range officer; JJ Stark of Eureka, Mont., wins the National 4-H Western Heritage Championship in the Central-Fire Division; A young cowboy places his shotgun ammo; Todd Kesner, project designer, at the championship shoot; A group of Montana 4-Hers dress for a day of historical education.



4-H Western Heritage Conference and Invitational Shoot held July 30-August 2, 2014, in Virginia City, Mont. Over 150 4-H members, parents, faculty and volunteer instructors from Montana, Missouri, Oregon, Alabama, Vermont and California attended two and a half days of historical workshops and tours as well as the national championship shoot which capped off the week.

Thanks to generous and enthusiastic support from the Montana *Friends of NRA* and The NRA Foundation, 52 shooters had the targets, ammunition and range props needed to compete for a national championship. To win the national championship, 4-H members had to not only shoot well, but also exhibit their historical knowledge on an Old West history exam as well as score highly on an interview with a period clothing judge. All three facets factored into a final score for each competitor.

When teens are told they have to learn history, some groan with anticipated boredom. Surveys have indicated that once 4-H members start living the history through authentic clothing and firearms, they begin studying historical areas of personal interest on their own. Many search for and purchase supplementary books, and a few have completed school projects using knowledge gained through their exposure to western heritage. This self-directed learning among the youth membership of the 4-H Western Heritage Project indicates the program's success in exciting young people about their past. 🐾

Have a shooting sports or scholarship program that needs support? Go to www.nrafoundation.org to apply for a grant! Learn more about the 4-H Western Heritage Project at www.4-hwesternheritageproject.org.