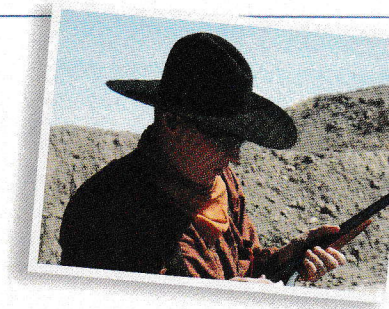


# RELIVING THE OLD WEST: ONE SHOT AT A TIME



The appeal of the traditional cowboy lifestyle draws many to Montana. One Montana 4-H Shooting Sports program uses the nostalgic Old West to inspire young people with an interest in frontier history.

by Todd Kesner

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The dingy 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, followed closely by a correspondingly-attired volunteer instructor. Welcome to the Montana 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 purpose of the project is to provide an avenue for 4-H members and adult leaders to experience the lifestyles and cultures of the Old West from the period of 1860–1900. The project meets educational objectives through a living history approach to learning, while instilling the concepts of gun safety and personal responsibility. Members dress in Old West clothing, shoot replica firearms of the frontier period, and expand their knowledge of U.S. history.

The shooting portion of the project is arguably the fastest-paced, most exciting, and spectator-friendly project in 4-H shooting sports. Shooters compete against the clock by firing

at steel targets at various distances with period firearms such as single-action revolvers, lever-action rifles, and double-barreled shotguns. Scoring is based on accuracy and the time that lapses between the initial buzzer and the last shot. Each missed target is penalized by the addition of five seconds to a competitor's time. During a shoot, 4-H'ers travel through a series of stages in a posse (group of shooters), along with an adult range officer. Stages consist of a sequence of targets set up at distances appropriate for sidearms, rifles, and shotguns. The shooting location of a stage may be as elaborate as a façade of a building, like the front door of a sheriff's office, or as simple as engaging targets over a table near a staged campfire and bedroll.

The project started as a way to retain older 4-H members in shooting sports beyond the BB gun and air rifle years. It is an advanced and action-oriented discipline that quickly evolved into an effective approach to teaching American history. After observing 4-H members drop out of shooting sports when

they reached middle school and high school years, a few informal interviews revealed that young people were simply bored. This was particularly true for 4-H members less interested in high-level competition. Many had met their goal of becoming safe, responsible, gun handlers, as well as better marksmen, and the interest of putting a pellet through a piece of paper in traditional 4-H shooting sports projects had lost its appeal.

After training a few adult volunteers and several 4-H members to safely participate in Western Action Shooting, it became apparent the project had tremendous potential for teaching about frontier days. What began as a pamphlet on Old West guns quickly expanded into a six chapter curriculum entitled the



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY TODD KESNER

Montana 4-H Western Heritage Project, which includes text and photos detailing authentic holsters, hats, boots, chaps, and men's and women's clothing. The majority of artifacts photographed for the book were found in small-town Montana museums. The curriculum's coffee table-style layout has resonated with the general public, and book sales help fund the project.

To win the state championship, 4-H members must not only shoot well, but also exhibit their historical knowledge on the Old West history exam and score highly on the clothing evaluation. Members are not required to own all the period-style clothing and accoutrements, but they do need to possess a working knowledge of them.

The 4-H Western Heritage Project shooting rules differ somewhat from the rules followed by adult organizations. Unlike adults, 4-H shooters do not pull their pistols from holsters. Instead, all firearms are staged on tables or waist-high wooden boxes and pistols are fired with a two-handed grip. There is no movement across the stage with firearms in hand, loaded or unloaded. Each gun is fired until empty and restaged before the 4-H member moves on. These adapted rules establish a firing line much like air rifle and air pistol. As a further safety precaution, a range officer travels directly behind the 4-H'er to provide coaching and supervision.

Most stages involve a rifle, a shotgun, and two pistols shot in a sequence described by the range officer. A 'procedural' is called when any portion of shooting is done out of sequence and a 10-second penalty is added to the shooter's time.

Targets consist of steel plates on stands at various heights and lead bullets are required to avoid ricochets. No targets remotely resembling humanoid shapes are allowed. Calibers range from .22 to .45 Colt with limited velocity and recoil.

Historical activities include museum visits, making felt (the material used in cowboy hats) by hand, sewing period clothing from authentic patterns, leatherwork, digitally-mapping Old West trails, discovering personal genealogy, researching minorities in the West, creating a frontier newspaper online (blogging under a historic looking masthead), and about 80 other activities presented in the 4-H Western Heritage Project Youth Activity Guide. Adult volunteer leaders use the full-color curriculum book as a historical guide.

Apparently, the project has a widespread appeal. A Montana training team has traveled to Missouri, Texas, and Oregon to train 4-H volunteers and their respective land-grant university faculty responsible for 4-H shooting

sports. Both the Oklahoma and Kansas 4-H programs have sent volunteers to these trainings. The demand for training has been both overwhelming and encouraging.

Most states adapt the project to fit their area. Eastern states are focusing on the Civil War era while Missouri tailored their project toward Jesse James and the starting point of the Pony Express.

But what brings the greatest reward? When teens are told they have to learn history, some groan with anticipated boredom. Surveys have indicated, however, 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. For adults leading the 4-H Western Heritage Project, observing self-directed learning among the youth membership is a key indicator of success in exciting young people about their past.

For more information on 4-H shooting sports, including archery, air rifle, air pistol, small-bore rifle, small-bore pistol, shotgun, muzzle loading, and hunting, contact your local MSU county or reservation Extension office. More information on the 4-H Western Heritage Project can be found at [www.4-hwesternheritageproject.org](http://www.4-hwesternheritageproject.org). ■

