



# 4-H WESTERN HERITAGE PROJECT

## Hands-on History Education

If you didn't love academic history courses, you may not be alone. Many primary and secondary school students rate history as a least-liked subject and perceive social studies as unimportant, both academically and in their daily lives. With remarkable consistency in 30 years of educational research, history courses are commonly described with dismissive terms.

What could be termed as a lack of enthusiasm for history education has manifested in the average assessment scores of primary and secondary students. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, only 20 percent of fourth-graders, 17 percent of eighth-graders, and 12 percent of high school seniors performed at or above the proficient level on the 2010 U.S. history assessment.

Invert the high school seniors number to see the surprising statistic: 88% of new voters are below the proficiency level in knowledge of U.S. history.

While this paints a grim picture, there is good news. It's not the subject of history that turns kids off, it's the way it's taught. Do you recall a school history class with a heavy dose of textbook readings, lecture, and rote memory? These traditional methodologies common

to formal history education remain teacher-centered and typically leave students disinterested and detached from the content. Textbook-focused strategies offer a shallow and uninspiring glimpse into the past with little regard for the humanness of the people involved or their challenges.

The key to excitement for history education is active learning. Studies have found that student interest and enjoyment in the classroom can be enhanced with activities like role playing, group discussion, making dioramas, playing games, working on projects or reports, expressing personal opinion, and creating or listening to stories. Allowing youth to pursue topics that interest them personally is just as important. These active learning approaches are often found to be challenging and more personally relevant to students.

The "Learn by Doing" philosophy is a pillar of the 4-H program, with a proven record of educational success dating back to 1902. Experiential educational techniques lend themselves well to projects in animal science, engineering, foods and nutrition, communication, leadership, and citizenship. But history? How can a young learner experience something that happened more than a century ago? Despite the odds, the 4-H Western Heritage Project is demonstrating positive impacts in both experiential history and learner interest.



## Experiential History Education

The 4-H Western Heritage Project is a combination of shooting sports and the study of the American frontier from 1860-1900. Members dress in authentic clothing, develop a nineteenth century persona based on historic research, and compete in a target shooting contest using period-correct firearms. At state or national contests, 4-Hers also take a written exam focusing on the history of the area surrounding the contest site, as well as on safety rules and general project topics. Shooting contributes 50% to their overall score while their persona interview, in front of a panel of judges, and their test score each contribute 25% of their overall score. As often happens, the best marksman is not guaranteed a championship. Contestants with lower shooting scores have a chance to win if they perform well on their persona interview and written exam. This aspect keeps more members engaged in the project, even if they can't physically shoot as well as top marksmen.

The 4-H Western Heritage Project began in 2008 in Gallatin County, MT, with six youth from the Bozeman area, and has since expanded to over 1,400 members in a dozen states. Rapid growth and interest drove the creation of a National 4-H Western Heritage Conference and Championship, with the sixth consecutive event scheduled for Winton, CA, in July of 2019. Each national conference includes a competitive event made of all three components of the project: shooting, persona interview, and the written exam.

Additionally, 4-H members and their families participate at the national conference in hands-on workshops, from old-fashioned photography to Native American medicinal plants, and many other frontier-related topics. Project members don't simply hear about a topic, they participate in it by hewing logs, panning for gold, hitching up a team of horses, making leather goods, cooking trail foods, polishing presentation skills, and even taking apart a pocket watch.

Conference speakers have included Mark Twain (as played by a Missouri Extension agent); Zerelda James, the mother of Frank and Jesse James (played by a living historian); Mark Hall-Patton, the Clark County, Nevada, museum administrator and television's *Pawn Star's* "Beard of Knowledge" expert on the History Channel; Dr. Andrew Patrick Nelson, Assistant Professor of Film History and Critical Studies at MSU and commentator on the documentary series "Legends & Lies: The Real West" on Fox News; Quintard Taylor, PhD, a nationally renowned historian on African Americans on the American frontier; and a top-notch cultural education presentation that included the Pikuni Badger 4-H Club, a traditional Blackfeet dance group of 4-H youth from the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana.

Participants are introduced to nationally-known scholars and personalities, and exposed to many careers related to historical study. Many of these potential careers do not fit the stereotypical image of a historian.

Historic sites featuring living historians greatly enhance learning by drawing visitors into the experience through characters in period dress using period correct accoutrements. The persons having learned the most, however, are the living historians themselves. Considerable research must be done to accurately portray authentic clothing, professions, tools, habits, dwellings, and lifestyles. The 4-H Western Heritage Project coined the phrase "participatory living history" where the 4-H member is not in the audience but participates in the past by becoming their persona. Just as importantly, the participant has the freedom to choose the type of character they want to develop. In the end, these young people learn enough to teach others and thus attain a very high level of learning.



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## Learner Interest

The active teaching methods incorporated in the participatory living history approach of the 4-H Western Heritage Project are vital to the project's success. In a classroom, the closest teaching methodology to participatory living history is historical drama, and studies indicate positive results in interest and knowledge retention.

Encouraging the development of a historical persona is vitally important in the project. It allows for creativity in who the 4-H member represents and the story surrounding that character. It requires research, results in a role-playing experience, and contains high doses of self-determined interest. Each youth chooses their persona and is free to change their mind when a better idea strikes. As a result, adult project leaders report witnessing a growing sophistication of the persona as the 4-H member matures.

Combining shooting with a persona in period dress, as well as authentic-looking stages and props, brings the past alive. Authenticity in all facets of the program is very important to participant interest and learning. As one youth reported in a research interview regarding authenticity, "I feel like I'm there in the Old West. I'm living it."

A retrospective pre/post study indicated that youth with at least one year in the 4-H Western Heritage

Project reported a much higher level of agreement to statements about learning history compared to their responses before experiencing the project.

The positive change among participants was statistically significant: they saw increased connection between the past and today, found personal importance in history, and could relate to historical roles of women and minority groups. Even youth who were drawn to the 4-H Western Heritage Project because they already had an interest in history moved significantly further up the 'agreed' scale.

Can the 4-H experiential learning model be applied to history education? The above results suggest it is not only applicable, but also increases youth interest in a topic which is typically found unappealing and emotionally flat.

Historians often say that history should not be read, but felt. The immersive aspect of the 4-H Western Heritage Project delivers history to a very personal, empathetic, and emotional place seldom reached in lectures and textbooks. The ultimate hope is that 4-H members will pursue their heightened interest as lifelong learners. To find out more about the 4-H Western Heritage Project, as a volunteer or a 4-H member, visit [montana4H.org](http://montana4H.org). ■

