



Parker Hall, Missoula County 4-H member and living historian

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By Colten Peterson

A guy by the name of Thomas Redmen appeared out of thin air in the Old Montana of Parker Hall's imagination.

Hall's Redmen was a surveyor on the Mullan Road. When the crew got back to Fort Walla Walla from Fort Benton in 1860, he struck out to seek his fortune the way many did back then. He went looking for gold.

Redman ended up at Frenchtown where, as someone trained in geology, he'd noticed promising quartz veins on his previous trip through.

Hall, 19, told Redmen's fictional story Thursday morning in a shady spot outside the 4-H Café at the Western Montana Fair.

He wore a period surveyor's outfit: wool Derby hat, wool vest, collarless brown cotton shirt, and pants tucked into black "common" boots, from a time before pants had pockets and a shoe could be worn on either foot.

"They were called straights," Lora Hall said of her son's boots. "The more you wore them the more comfortable they got because there was no right or left one."

Lora Hall, a former interpretive ranger for the National Park Service, is leader of the Treasure State 4-H Club in Missoula. The club occupies a special niche in the Missoula County 4-H sphere. A few members have animals, but all of them are into shooting sports, including archery, muzzleloaders and replica firearms of the frontier period.

"I think a lot of people don't realize that shooting sports in 4-H is one of the biggest projects next to hogs," Lora said.

With that in common, and a love for history, it was natural that Parker Hall gravitated as a young teen from miniature horses to the Western Heritage Project.

The program that combines study of the Old West from 1860-1900 with Western action shooting was developed by Todd Kesner of Bozeman, now director of the Montana 4-H Center at Montana State University, along with Will Abbot.

"The idea was that kids today aren't learning history," said Lora Hall, a certified instructor in the program. "Todd Kesner came up with the idea of developing the history program, and kind of the carrot was being able to shoot historic firearms. To do that you had to develop a character and you had to study that time period. So he paired cowboy action shooting with living history and created this program. And it's become hugely successful."

Nine states from Alabama and Missouri to California, Washington and Oregon have 4-H Western Heritage Projects, and a couple of others are developing them. Six states were represented July 31-Aug. 3 in Deer Lodge, where more than 80 competitors gathered for the national conference and competition.

It was Parker's time to shine. He's already a living history interpreter at the Historical Museum at Fort Missoula and, according to mentor Bill Weikel from the museum, a sponge for historic surveying knowledge.



At nationals, between workshops, safety meetings and tours of the Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic site and the Old Prison Museum, Hall took first place in the men's living history persona category for his presentation of the fictional character of Redmen. He placed third as the overall "Top Hand."

He was also among the top four in the other two categories, historical knowledge and shooting skill. The latter, held at the Powell County Shooting Range southwest of town, is based on speed and accuracy and counted for half of the Top Hand score.

Hall's weapons of choice are a replica 1873 Henry lever-action rifle, an 1860 single-action Colt "Peacemaker" and a side-by-side shotgun with internal hammers, circa the 1880s.

Kabrina, Jacob and Josiah Fitch from Treasure State 4-H also registered top-four placings in Deer Lodge, after Kabrina Fitch placed first in the senior division of women's living history persona at the Montana state meet. Aaron and Olivia Prati were also part of the 4-H team.

“What’s cool about it is, of the 17 award categories, a kid from Missoula County placed in 12 of them in the nation and 13 in the state,” Lora Hall said. “And we don’t compete in the two centerfire (events).”

For Parker, coming out on top of the living history persona judging that included blacksmiths, schoolteachers, shop owners, cooks, undertakers, cowboys and Civil War soldiers, was especially rewarding.

“That’s what I really wanted to do well at this year,” said the home-schooler from Frenchtown. “I haven’t gotten any national placing really before. Last year at Fort Benton I got fourth in persona, and I wanted to try to get better than that.”

Surveyors were trailblazers, Hall told the judges in his interview/presentation.

“Without them the West would have been a chaotic and wild place to live,” he said. “Surveyors made settlement possible by surveying wagon routes, railroads, mining claims and new town sites.”

From Lewis and Clark in the early 19th century to the Mullan road-building expeditions, they did it with the most modern instruments that seem primitive now.

“You have to imagine how hard it was back then,” Hall said. “They didn’t have GPS or modern compasses or anything. Lewis and Clark had to use a sextant for latitude and longitude that was meant to be used on the ocean with a perfect horizon.”

Both Parker and Lora Hall have been volunteers at the Historical Museum at Fort Missoula. Parker was accepted for a living history internship this summer, and he's working on tailoring his presentation as Thomas Redmen to the fort’s needs, according to education director Kristjana Eyjolfsson.

He’s given a couple of performances, including one for the museum’s History Camp in July.

“I was really impressed how well Parker was able to convey what the job was like that he was discussing, and the technology,” Eyjolfsson said. “And also the personal things, what life would have been like for that person.”

Eyjolfsson pointed Hall to Weikel and Kurt Luebke of the design firm DJ&A, both longtime members of the Montana Surveying Reenactment Corps. Weikel is

also the local expert on Mullan Road history and runs the cheese curds booth at the fair for the Friends of the Historical Museum at Fort Museum.

He said he invited the Halls to peruse and discuss his collection of surveying equipment, some of which date back to the 1700s. At the Fourth of July celebration at Fort Missoula, Hall donned his historic surveyors regalia and joined Weikel at the Lewis and Clark display.

“He went probably two hours listening to me and never said a word,” Weikel said. “All of a sudden I’m down at one end of the table and somebody asked about (an instrument) and he started explaining it.

“That was pretty cool, because to break in with Kurt and I, that’s pretty hard for even an adult surveyor. For a kid who’s just trying to learn something, trying to play a persona, that was pretty good.”