



The only way you can tell this photo was not taken in the 19th century is the color and some of the guns and hats.

COWBOY ACTION SHOOTING IN MONTANA 4-H

WANT TO KNOW HOW TO GET YOUR TEENAGER INTERESTED IN SHOOTING?

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ANNE L. MILLER

When Montana 4-H Shooting Sports Program Coordinator Todd Kesner saw a hole in the shooting curriculum, he filled it. With 19th century firearms, holsters, bandanas and a heavy dose of the Frontier West.

Known as the 4-H Western Heritage Project (WHP), this is the first 4-H program in the nation to offer Cowboy Action Shooting (CAS) and immerse participants in Western history. The brainchild of Kesner and Missoula-based historian and independent photographer Will Abbot, WHP came as a way to engage and retain teens in exist-



Dressing like a prairie woman offers plenty of protection from spent shells.

ing Shooting Sports programs. “The whole idea was to keep these teenagers engaged and in the program,” explains Kesner, “They were tired of shooting a pellet through a piece of paper.”

WE’LL SEE WHAT WE CAN DO

Enter history, period clothing and fascinating guns. The official description reads:

“This project includes 4-H Cowboy Action Shooting and more. Members will learn about the history of 19th century firearms, period correct frontier clothing, hats, boots, holsters, and the true lifestyles of those who lived in the Old West from many diverse walks of life. Some members may be interested in becoming Old West re-enactors while others might focus mainly on the shooting aspects of the project – or both. Firearm safety and responsible behavior is stressed throughout the project.”

Students are trained to use lever-action rifles, single action revolvers and shotguns in practice and competition. While period or reproduction firearms are not required, the focus is from 1860 to 1900. Black powder firearms are allowed to be used in the project if the local 4-H program provides instructors trained in both Western heritage and 4-H black powder disciplines. Due to valuable cost-savings for participating counties, .22 caliber firearms are heavily used and encouraged. Strong support has come from Cimarron Firearms Company, located in Fredericksburg, Texas. “I started calling around,” ex-

plains Kesner, “They looked at the program and said, ‘This is pretty cool, we’ll see what we can do.’” Abbot notes that “Cimarron has been a big help in acquiring and recommending reproduction historic firearms for project.”

Firearms are owned by the local programs in the six Montana counties offering the experience to over 60 participants. 4H members participate in timed events, maneuvering stage to stage and delivering various firing patterns in a distinctly outdoor Western setting. And, while participants can enter the competitive world of CAS if they choose, there are key differences. Namely, in safety and education.

“One thing we’ve done differently [from traditional CAS rules] is that we don’t allow [kids] to draw from the holster,” says Kesner. With youth starting the program at age 12, it became very important to start the stages with guns on safe, stable surfaces at the firing line, rather than on the person. “It took some of the pressure off...for the older kids as well,” he explains. And, as with all 4-H Shooting Sports disciplines, it continued the emphasis of safety first and foremost.

TAKE HIM TO THE BASEMENT

Youngsters earn the opportunity to shoot by hitting the history books. “One of the keys is family involvement,” says Abbot. “There’s a place for everyone, whether on the range or not.” Kesner explains that one of the project goals was to appeal to a wider skill set

than shooting alone. The range of skill sets can include carpentry and leatherwork to sewing and cooking, to genealogy and beyond.

And this is where the program takes a ricocheting turn. Kesner appealed to Bozeman, Montana’s Pioneer Museum for help with what was originally to be a brochure on the 1860-1900 timeline in Western America. An Enthusiastic response from the staff of the Pioneer Museum soon led Kesner and Abbot trekking across Montana and beyond, seeking out additional collections. “The smaller the museum, the more excited they were,” Kesner adds, “Good grief, we were in Deer Lodge a couple of days. They have a fantastic museum there.” Treasure after treasure was pulled carefully from vaults, cases, basements and displays to be carefully photographed by Abbot with its story teased onto paper by Kesner.

According to Abbot, “There are museums like this in every town.” He goes on, “And they gave us time and space and welcomed us in.” With his 30-plus years of experience with museums and documentary photography, the man knows his way through these collections.

Joining the team of experts was Katelyn Andersen, a Montana State University Extension agent with a background in Family Consumer Sciences, including period clothing and fabrics. The end result is the book, *Montana Western Heritage Project*.



Who would have guessed that a “Best Dressed Gentleman” award would go to a guy wearing suspenders and a bowler hat.



Natalie Abbot received "Best Dressed Lady" at the State Shoot in 2012.

The book serves two purposes: to provide quality education and to provide valuable funding for the program itself. The volume's coffee-table size has appealed to many beyond the program, accounting for 60 percent of the total sales. The experience lingers for Abbot,

who worked pro bono on the project. He also serves as a historic interpreter in Virginia City, Mont. One of his favorite treasures? "Chief Joseph's rifle. The surrender rifle that is on display in Fort Benton, Mont. at the Upper Missouri Breaks Interpretive Center." An 1866 Henry was turned loose from the case by staff excited by the Heritage Project. But more than that was the background it rested upon for the final photographs. Abbott adds reverently, "It was a beaded wool shawl or rug that had been traded by a surrendered [Nez Perce] Indian woman for food."

The excitement over the book has also led 4-H and Shooting Sports to new opportunities. "I've been able to speak at museums," says Kesner. It has gained them a foot in the door in many locations that "4-H has never had access to" including the famous CM Russell Auction, explains the youth education advocate. "When you get to talking about the project, you never know [what will happen]," he adds. Case in point: Just

before Christmas, Jesse James' great-great niece came along and knocked on his office door, offering to work on a genealogy section for the anticipated Youth Activity Guide. A Master's student at Montana State University, the project seemed to suit her.

AIM LOW BOYS...THEY'RE RIDING SHETLANDS

Abbot has more than his photographs linked to the program. His 16-year-old daughter Natalie became the WHP's first Junior Leader at age 15. She serves in the same Jr. Leader role in the pistol discipline as well.

She describes her interest in the program like this: "It was my very first shoot with my family. And I saw how fast they went and said, 'I want to do that!' It was definitely an eye-opener."

In the beginning, the shooting aspect of a timed event was a bit daunting. Her group of six spends one and a half to two hours a week on the range. The competition portion of the project

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culminates with the states shoot each summer. "A lot of it has to be self-taught," explains the young leader, "You have to do it yourself. Then you say, 'Ahhh, now I know what they've been trying to show me for the past year.'"

But make no mistake. There is a lot of showing going on. "Every stage has a different course of fire that you have to remember to get through the patterns," says Natalie. "They walk everyone through each stage before you even get your gun." Then after breaking into smaller groups, called posses, the young group goes through it again. Anyone feeling the moment of panic at the firing line can again ask the range officer for direction. Natalie's dad, Abbot, chimes back in: "This is far less about competition and far more about the education component."

And to get the timer started? A Western line is required, traditional or not. The Abbot family favorite? "Aim low boys....they're riding Shetlands."

YOU KNOW YOU'RE ONTO SOMETHING WHEN....

The program is moving across the country like gunfighters chasing trains. Training has been provided for active programs in Missouri, Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas and Oregon. Additional interest lays in Idaho, South Carolina, Virginia and Vermont. And the list is growing. Students from the Missouri program competed this past year in

Montana's State Shoot.

Abbot sums it up this way: "You know you're onto something when a teenager brings you a history book and says, 'Look at what I bought!'" **WSJ**

Editor's note: The 4-H Heritage Project can be found at www.4Hwesternheritage.weebly.com. Todd Kesner can be reached at the Montana 4-H Center for Youth Development with (406) 994-6816. His email is tkesner@montana.edu.



Shooting without sleeves had to hurt when the spent shells fly out!

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