

4-H Saddle Club, drill team reunite at fair

Written by Darci Tomky

They didn't have their horses in a precise, tight formation last Saturday, but they definitely could be spotted in their bright green neck ties, laughter and smiles.

It was nothing but a good time as the Holyoke 4-H Saddle Club and Drill Team held a reunion during the Phillips County Fair Saturday, July 27.

Twenty-one people kicked off the day with a float in the fair parade, followed by an afternoon of reminiscing during an open house and tin can dinner prepared by Dale Hansen.

Many kids were impacted by the drill team led by coordinator Dorothy Leeper from 1960 to the mid-1970s. It was part of the 4-H Saddle Club in Holyoke, with leaders Kenneth Ross and Mickey Kramer.

The precision riding team was a big commitment for the 4-H kids—ages 9-18. They hauled their horses to the Phillips County Fairgrounds a couple times a week to practice, with three to five practices a week in the summer just before fair. "Those horses went through a lot with us kids," said former drill team member Mary Poe.

Leeper's strict coaching and the kids' hard work was worth it, though, when they had a precise drill team show they could be proud of.



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The reunion of the 4-H Saddle Club and drill team is well represented on a float in the Phillips County Fair parade on Interocean Avenue in Holyoke Saturday morning, July 27. —Enterprise photo

“Dorothy was very strict, but she had our safety in mind—and that made us better,” said Poe. With the kids and horses criss crossing and doing dangerous maneuvers around the arena, it was important to have the timing perfect.

Leeper’s whistle became somewhat of a legend, because if she blew it, “You better listen!” said Dale Haynes at the reunion on Saturday.

Figure eights, thread the needle, propellers, peel the onion and pinwheels were all part of the intricate routines performed mostly at a gallop pace.

The former 4-H’ers remembered the drill team show was highlighted two nights at the Phillips County Fair each year. They also had special maneuvers they used in parades in Holyoke, Julesburg, Haxtun, Sterling and other area towns.

The group even traveled to Cheyenne Frontier Days in Wyoming in 1972 to perform in the parade.

Traveling with the drill team gave them pride in their appearance and in their abilities. “Back then in our community, that was a big deal,” said Helen Miller.

Leeper taught the kids teamwork, cooperation and patience, but they also had a lot of fun, too.

“We couldn’t let everyone down,” said Gail Schlachter, noting the importance of being at all the practices. The formations were based on sets of four riders, so each person needed to be there

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for practice.

The drill team started out with 14 kids, with one year having the most at 32.

Drill team attire changed throughout the years, starting out with blue plaid shirts, blue jeans and hats. Another year, moms had to sew green ribbons down the pants to match the green neck ties for the kids and green and white leggings on the horses' legs.



Former members of the 4-H Saddle Club drill team who attended the July 27 reunion are pictured from left, front row, Juli (Shew) Jarrett, Pat (Groshans) Heermann, Diane Lutze, leader Kenneth Ross, Keith Hogsett and Dale Haynes; second row, Helen (Smith) Miller, Mary (Stein) Poe, Gail (Skinner) Schlachter, Janis (Bulkeley) Jecminek, Shelly (Sprague) Fisher, Diane (Kramer) Anderson and Marsha (Machamer) Hardy; and back row, Kathi (Shew) Stites, Noel Poe, Marilee (Poe) Riley, Rochelle (Browne) Smith, Keith Hansen and Dale Hansen. Others were also part of the reunion float in the Phillips County Fair parade that morning and at the reunion festivities that afternoon. —Enterprise photo

One year was gold shirts, jeans with gold stripes and colored blankets, while red, white and blue was featured another time.

When the drill team got really good, they also carried flags while doing the drills.

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It was obvious from the reunion that the Saddle Club and drill team was more than just practice, practice, practice.

Schlachter said if they got everything done right in practice, they could use the time left over for fun gymkhana events while they all had their horses at the arena.

The group and their horses also braved the wilderness for some overnight campouts as well as picnics at Gilbert's Grove and Old Baldy.

At the reunion, Leeper was remembered for her dedication to the drill team for so many years. The group was also quick to acknowledge their parents and families for their support and commitment to practices and shows.

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