

“The People’s Celebration” marks 150th birthday of USDA, land grant colleges and homesteaders

In the midst of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln signed into law three landmark pieces of legislation creating a new “people’s department” (the US Department of Agriculture); establishing land grant colleges in every state and opening the west to homesteading. To commemorate the 150th anniversary of those historic signings, a “People’s Celebration” is planned for Thursday afternoon and evening, Nov. 8, at the Richland County Fairgrounds’ Event Center in Sidney.

A number of local USDA agencies and programs (Agricultural Research Service, Farm Service Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Forest Service, Rural Development, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, WIC, SNAP and the School Lunch program) , along with local land grant college and historical organizations (Eastern Ag Research Center, Richland County Extension and the MonDak Heritage Center) have joined together for the celebration which will feature booths highlighting the history and current activities of the various agencies and programs, along with an overview of homesteading in the region from the MonDak Heritage Center. Representatives will be available to chat with people about their work and answer questions. In addition, the Richland County Conservation District will be incorporating the homesteading theme in their annual awards dinner which will follow the afternoon’s activities at the same location. More details below.

Displays, school tours, and more

The afternoon begins with an Open House at the Event Center from 1-5 pm, including display booths, speakers, and more. The first hour of the afternoon welcomes school tours with each booth offering short demonstrations and/or presentations specifically targeting 5th-graders, although other ages are welcome. Invitations have been extended to area school 5th grade teachers to participate. Interested persons can contact Beth Redlin at 433-9427 to arrange a class tour.

Other plans for the day include a display of our USDA photo contest entries and winners; a farm-themed kindergarten art exhibit, and door prize drawings, refreshments and birthday cake, all donated by USDA and RCCD employees and the MonDak Heritage Center in Sidney. Prizes for the photo contest are also being donated by USDA employees. For more information on the contest, see related story or contact Julie Goss or Heather Luinstra at 433-2103 x3. Entry deadline is Monday, Nov. 5.

A visit with Abe’s cousin!

An extra special treat for the afternoon is a visit from “Abraham Lincoln” or rather a real-life cousin. Bill Brenner of Sidney can trace his family’s heritage back to President Lincoln’s mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, and he is understandably proud of that connection. Bill has agreed to participate in “The People’s Celebration” Open House on Thursday, Nov. 8th and will have items from his personal Lincoln family collection on display. He’s also available throughout the afternoon to talk with school children and other visitors about his historic relative.

Afternoon Speaker Schedule

In addition to the displays, the MonDak Heritage Center and several USDA participants are also giving short talks throughout the afternoon on a wide variety of contemporary and historical topics related to their agency missions. They include:

- 2:00 pm: Gary Adams, USDA, APHIS, Helena - “Emerald Ash Borer”
- 2:30 pm: Mark Henning, USDA, NRCS, Miles City - “Born in the Dust Bowl: Building Soil Health”

- 3:00 pm: Tony Preite, USDA, Rural Development – “RD Programs for Oil-Impacted Communities”
- 3:20 pm: Bill Brenner – Cutting of the People’s 150th Birthday Cake for all to enjoy!
- 3:40 pm: “Smokey Bear” and Speaker from USDA, FS – “History of the Forest Service & Dakota Prairie Grasslands”
- 4:10 pm: Tatyana Rand, USDA, ARS, Sidney – “Wheat Stem Sawfly”
- 4:40 pm: Benjamin L. Clark, MonDak Heritage Center, Sidney – “Historical Homesteading Review”

Centennial Farms and Homestead Dreams

The People’s Celebration concludes with a no-host social at the Event Center at 5 pm hosted by the Richland County Conservation District, to be followed by the District’s annual Awards Dinner at 6 pm. The meal is also open to the public; however, there is a \$12 per person charge. To reserve tickets, call Julie Goss at 406-433-1203 x101.

In addition to the Conservation District’s traditional awards, the group will also be recognizing two Richland County “Centennial Farms/Ranches” which have been in operation locally under the same families for 100 years or more. The two will also be included in the Montana Historical Society’s Montana Centennial Farm and Ranch Program.

To conclude the “People’s Celebration,” the Conservation District has also arranged to have Montana Historian and Storyteller Hal Stearns speak at 7 pm on “Homestead Dreams: From High Hopes to Lingering Legacy.” In his talk, Stearns will explore the American West’s last great agricultural land rush and what followed, illustrating his talk with a myriad of signs left on the landscape. Montana, Stearns says, has always been a state marked by boom and bust—the fur trade, cattle on the open range, the gold and silver, coal and oil rushes. But no moment in our history has left a mark quite like that of the “honyocker” or homesteader.

Mr. Stearns’ presentation is FREE and open to the public. His appearance is made possible by the Humanities Montana Speakers Bureau Program. Partial funding for the Speakers Bureau program is provided by a legislative grant from Montana’s Cultural Trust and from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

We hope you can join us for this fun commemoration!