

Las Vegas Pioneer Day at Mormon Fort Historic Park

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Note: A reporter with the Las Vegas Review Journal, Valerie Putman, attended the Pioneer Day event at the Old Fort on Saturday, July 23rd. Valerie spent over an hour at the Fort and visited all of the activities and spoke with several of the volunteers, attendees, Beth, Mara, Julie and Ruth Rauma, Friends of the Fort.

By VALERIE PUTNAM

Las Vegas review-journal

Las Vegas has a rich history predating gambling and the Strip. A remnant of its history is found next to Cashman Center at the Old Las Vegas Mormon Fort State Historic Park. The oldest man-made permanent structure in Southern Nevada, the fort dates back to 1855 when a small group of Mormon missionaries discovered “an oasis in the desert” and decided to settle along the Las Vegas Creek. A portion of the fort remains, while other parts are re-creations to complete the look. The founding of this historic site was commemorated recently during the annual Pioneer Day Celebration, held on the Mormon Fort grounds.

“What we’re doing is celebrating all that settled here and helped create the fort,” said Julie Davies, vice president of Friends of the Fort and a Daughters of Utah Pioneers member. “There are so many layers of history, people who helped lay the foundation for our city. This is where it started.” The four-hour event is sponsored by Friends of the Fort, Daughters of Utah Pioneers and the state park.

“A lot of people aren’t aware that this is a state park,” said Ruth Rauma, Friends of the Fort president and Daughters of Utah Pioneers member. “When they come here for events they discover the fort and how wonderful it is.” The Pioneer Day celebration at the fort began three years ago after Park Supervisor Beth Hewitt noticed an influx of park visitors on July 24. “It was really unexpected,” Hewitt recalled. “I kind of joked with one of them, ‘So is this some kind of Mormon holiday?’ and they said, ‘Yes, it is.’”

July 24 is Pioneer Day, a holiday of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that commemorates the Mormon pioneers’ passage into the Salt Lake Valley in Utah. The following year Hewitt planned activities to entertain the expected crowd. “I knew we had a visitor base so we planned some activities for them,” Hewitt said. “We started out slow.” Last year, Mara Meservy, Daughters of Utah Pioneers event chairwoman, took charge of the event. She planned more activities and enlisted help from the LDS church to market it.

Prior to Pioneer Day, Daughters of Utah Pioneers hosted an annual Settlement Day event here in June. “This year we merged Settlement Day with the Pioneer Day Celebration for an even larger event,” Davies said. “It’s getting bigger every year.” The event was open to the community and celebrates pioneer history in Las Vegas, from the fort’s founding to pony express riders.

“It’s celebrating the pioneer history and sharing what happened in other years up to today,” Rauma said. “We really want this to be a fun family event for people to come and enjoy the fort.” During the event, booths set up

throughout the park showcased historic games and crafts and provided storytelling and music to entertain the more than 1,200 attendees. “These are things that kids, and even some adults, have never done,” Davies said. “They’re able to do it here for free.”

Ariane Shumway watched her 10-year-old daughter Amelia learn to braid a rug for the first time. She was taught by volunteer LeAnn Browning, a longtime member of Daughters of Utah Pioneers. “It’s fun,” Amelia said as she braided the strands of cloth. “It takes a lot of focus.” Interweaving strips of cloth, rug makers make rugs in all sorts of shapes and sizes. The event organizers donate all completed rugs to the Park. Other hands-on demonstrations included playing vintage games such as cat’s cradle and hopscotch. Alondra Castillo’s two children, Joseph, 7, and Isabella, 5, created a simple toy made of string and a button. “It’s fun,” Joseph said. “You can spin it around.”

Daughters of Utah Pioneers member Lori Brinkerhoff demonstrated the button spinning game by winding up the string then pulling on both ends causing the button to spin. The button is laced on the string by the two middle holes. “My kids wanted to stay home and play with their iPads,” said Alondra, who has attended the event for the past two years. “But I’m like, ‘No, you guys, we’re going to learn more about the pioneers. I think it’s important for our children to remember our history.’”

Volunteers also taught children domestic pioneering skills, such as how to wash clothes, milk a cow and make a bonnet. Geneva Fellows, Daughters of Utah Pioneers volunteer, showed children how to make butter by shaking a small jar filled with cream and a little salt.

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“They are actually eating their own butter,” Fellows said, wearing authentic dress from the time period. “I think it’s important for our children to learn about their pioneer heritage. It helps make them more appreciative.”

Free rides aboard the Jupiter Express train was a popular attraction. It was modeled after the Central Pacific Railroad’s historic steam locomotive “Jupiter.” Passenger wagons filled with laughing attendees traversed the park.

Inside the park’s visitor center, Daughters of Utah Pioneers members Colleen Perry, Louise Dolenc, Elaine Kennedy and LaRue Rosenberg quietly sat in a small room, each diligently working on a square of a 48-inch-by-48-inch quilt.

“We are demonstrating quilting,” Kennedy said. “We’d like to teach the younger generation something that our pioneers used to do all the time. We hate to see some of these arts get lost.”



Savannah Dunn, left, helps Jane Dye make a throw rug during Pioneer Day at the Old Las Vegas Mormon Fort at 500 E. Washington Ave. in Las Vegas on Saturday, July 23, 2016. Bill Hughes/Las Vegas Review-Journal



Sheila Moulton, right, helps Zack Graham make a spinner toy during Pioneer Day at the Old Las Vegas Mormon Fort at 500 E. Washington Ave. in Las Vegas on Saturday, July 23, 2016. Bill Hughes/Las Vegas Review-Journal



Heather Dobbs, left, takes a picture of her children, from left, Brody, Myren, Jessie and Ryder in a covered wagon during Pioneer Day at the Old Las Vegas Mormon Fort at 500 E. Washington Ave. in Las Vegas on Saturday, July 23, 2016. Bill Hughes/Las Vegas Review-Journal



Brody Dobbs, left, poses in a covered wagon with his siblings, from left, Myren, Jessie and Ryder during Pioneer Day at the Old Las Vegas Mormon Fort at 500 E. Washington Ave. in Las Vegas on Saturday, July 23, 2016. Bill Hughes/Las Vegas Review-Journal



Dolenc, left, and Colleen Perry work on a quilt during Pioneer Day at the Old Las Vegas Mormon Fort at 500 E. Washington Ave. in Las Vegas on Saturday, July 23, 2016. Bill Hughes/Las Vegas Review-Journal



Shelly Callister knits during Pioneer Day at the Old Las Vegas Mormon Fort at 500 E. Washington Ave. in Las Vegas on Saturday, July 23, 2016. Bill Hughes/Las Vegas Review-Journal



PHOTO: Las Vegas Pioneer Adobe building.