

Friday night kick-off combines cuteness with culinary flair

**By Traci Chapman,
Staff Writer**

One secret sometimes kept too well is who exactly is behind Western Days and that the event is – beyond Mustang's biggest gathering – also a fundraiser.

"We get that all the time, that people believe Western Days is a city-sponsored event," Mustang Chamber of Commerce CEO Renee Peerman said. "In fact, it's the chamber that sponsors and puts together Western Days, although we of course partner with city of Mustang, the school district, businesses and others to make it all come together."

The fundraiser portion of the program comes through vendors' fees and the like, to an extent, but a large part of what helps the chamber provide programs such as student outreach, scholarships and more depends on one of the more delicious aspects of Western Days activities, its annual chili cook-off.

"The cook-off is a way for our area businesses and other organizations to get their names out there, to mingle with the community and to illustrate why being a part of the chamber is an important service to the business community overall," Peerman said. "It helps that it's a lot of fun, is the sign that Western Days has really begun and the chili offerings are so well done."

Held Friday from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. in front of Mustang Town Center, this year's chili cook-off offers a chance for those taking part to spice things up, while giving attendees the opportunity to try something new – and then weigh in on who concocted the best creation. Awards for judges choice, peoples choice and most popular are awarded each year.

Creative Cooks

For those who want to try their hand at wowing the crowd, entry fees are \$20; applications must be turned in by Sept. 3. Contestants must bring a 10 x 10 canopy; the chamber provides tables, sample cups, spoons and napkins, and participants can decorate



**Chili Cook-off - Friday, Sept. 6th, 6-8 pm.
Best Dressed Cowboy/Cowgirl Contest - Friday, Sept. 6th, 6:30 pm.**



-photos by Traci Chapman

Two of Western Days most popular events take place Friday, officially kicking off the annual event – the chili cook-off and best dressed cowboy and cowgirl.

their area. Participants are asked to bring about 15 to 20 pounds of cooked chili to ensure they don't run out.

"There is no electricity since the cook-off is held outside so we have people who bring Coleman stoves and things like that to keep their food warm," Peerman said. "We suggest contestants bring condiments for

their chili, and they can sell drinks and other items that encourage the public to vote for them by putting money in their tip jar – which is how the people's choice award is determined.

"You may add anything to your recipe, including canned chili – it's not a sanctioned chili cook-off – we want this to be fun and it's a way

to raise funds for the chamber and promote participant businesses and organizations," she said.

Chili Connoisseurs

For those who love chili, the Friday event is a perfect opportunity to try recipes as different as the people who offer them. Sampling tickets cost \$5 and many chili contestants offer the condiments and other items suggested by chamber organizers.

The cook-off also goes on concurrently with one of Western Days' cutest events, best dressed cowboy-cowgirl competition, and is the perfect way to highlight the fun of childhood with a fundraiser that allows the chamber to offer high school scholarships, collaborations with business-themed clubs at the school district and more, Peerman said.

"It's fun to see the little ones and their parents take part in cowboy-cowgirl," she said. "I always love to see all the people who come out for that and the chili cook-off and who discover that both are going on – and they didn't know about it."

Cowgirls and cowboys are judged by age groups:

- Infants to 12 months;
- 1- and 2-year-olds;
- 3- and 4-year-olds;
- 5- and 6-year-olds; and
- 7- and 8-year olds.

Any child taking part must be accompanied by a parent or guardian.

Longtime cook-off sponsor First National Bank and Trust again serves as chili cook-off organizer this year, while SSM Health Medical Group sponsors the cowboy/cowgirl contest.

Cook-off participants are still welcome as of press time. Rules and applications are available at www.mustangwesterndays.com/applications/; more information about this year's Western Days is available on the chamber website, located at www.mustangwesterndays.com.

Cowboy-cowgirl best dressed contest entries are also available on the Western Days website and sign-up that day begins at 6 p.m., with judging beginning at 6:30 p.m.