

Conservation Corps fort-ifies historical society project

GENE SEARS

FORT LUPTON — The hundred or so Weld County Youth Conservation Corps participants who spent much of the past seven months at the South Platte Valley Historical Society's land north of Fort Lupton don't have to wonder what work was like in the 1830s.

They know.

They know what it is like to use old draw knives to peel bark from pine logs in weather so cold they had to duck inside every 10 minutes to get warm and in weather so hot the knives became slick with sweat.

They've learned how to apply stucco by hand, stoke a blacksmith's forge, put up

trusses, whitewash walls, build rail fences and tar a roof. They learned it all to help with the reconstruction of the old Fort Lupton that is the centerpiece of the society's property.

The jobs were often demanding, and sometimes messy. But the young workers are already looking back at their work with pride.

"I've got to say when we were tarring the roof it was the best time. We came out filthy, we came out tarred up," Daniel Rodriguez said.

As Rodriguez and the others labored, they were learning the about the region where most of them, who range in age from 11 to 24, live.

Education is a large part of the WCYCC, which started in 1993 as an extension program of Weld County Employment Services. Four entities make up the WCYCC. Each uses crews of six to 10 that work, depending upon the group, from four weeks in the summer to year-round. AmeriCorps, ages 17-24, receive a living stipend and an educational award when they complete their service. TIGHT crews, for ages 14 through 17, are referred through case managers and work



PHOTO BY GENE SEARS

WCYC workers Carpio Nira and Daniel Rodriguez skin logs the old-fashioned way, readying them for integration into the Fort.

up to six months. Fourteen- and 15-year-olds enrolled in Summer Youth work two days a week for eight weeks, giving them their first summer jobs. The youngest participants sixth- through ninth-graders in Learn&Serve, volunteer for more than 100 hours during a four-week period, and receive a scholarship of \$500.

Weld County Commissioner Barbara Kirkmeyer, a fort volunteer and SPVHS board member, saw the opportunity for the Corps to get involved, according to team leader Eric Warrington.

The reasons the youth are in

the WCYCC vary, he said. Some are court-ordered, others are strongly encouraged to be in the program. Eighty percent are high-risk.

"We didn't know what their response would be to the work here," Warrington said. "But the majority of our crews have fallen in love with the work here. They'll say, 'Hey it's Wednesday, we are going to Fort Lupton.'"

Volunteers who regularly work at the fort have enjoyed

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PHOTO BY GENE SEARS

From left, Casey Kratzer, Daniel Rodriguez, and Carpio Nira, workers from the Weld County Conservation Corps, select timbers to prepare for construction at the South Platte Valley Historical Society's rebuilding of Fort Lupton. Throughout the year, cadres of workers cycle through the fort and the surrounding historical park, working on a myriad of projects.

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the association with the young people, said Jim Talbert, SPVHS park manager. "They did what they were asked, and they were very inquisitive."

Talbert estimates that the WCYCC's help has moved the estimated completion date up by

a year to this September.

"Our kids really like it, they always want to come here," said Holly Nelson, the field coordinator said. "This is probably the coolest project we have done, because kids have learned the most from the work they do here. The guys have been really good about teaching them skills. They've learned how to do a lot of stuff by hand. Plus it will be here for a

long time so they can say, "Hey I did that."

"Even if I wasn't working here anymore, I'd probably still come out here," said Casey Kratzer.

Rodriguez agreed, and then added another reason to return-volunteer cook Norma Taylor's lunches.

"I like the meals. They cook some pretty good grub up there," he said.