

Teens Down And Dirty On the Farm

By Ann DeFrance
Staff Writer

The nearly 1,000 teen-agers taking their spring field trips to Oklahoma City this week are doing what most such teens do — they've visited the stockyards and the Cowboy Hall of Fame, gone to a dance or two.

Most of these kids show up at these places well-groomed but with dirt under their fingernails, because along the way, they've stopped the car, jumped out, grabbed a handful of roadside soil and rubbed it through their fingers. These kids are really into dirt.

Not only that, but they're champions at it, and they're here for what one young man solemnly referred to as "the World Series of land judging."

The National Land, Pasture and Range Judging Contest this year drew some 1,000 Future Farmers of America and 4-H entrants from 34 states.

Where they come from, they aren't the athletes, the artists, the brains. They're ag students and this is their Olympics, their Oscar, their Pulitzer. At school in Richmond, Ky., this trophy isn't just as important as a basketball trophy, said Dwane White, hunched over a clump of grass in a bright T-shirt that identified him as a Kentucky state land judging champion.

"It's more important. It's a tradition."

The Richmond team set out for Oklahoma by car last Friday. They stopped once in a while and rubbed soil between their fingers for practice, then hurried ahead so they'd have time to get a feel for Oklahoma's foundation. They crossed a time zone, White said, so by the time the awards banquet ended in Oklahoma City Thursday night it would be late in Kentucky, but the

See LAND, Page 2



— Staff Photo by Paul B. Southerland

Land judging contestants file through a trench in an Oklahoma pasture with scorecards for soil characteristics. Some 1,000 teens competed in the national event.

Land

From Page 1
folks would nevertheless be waiting up for a phone call.

Other early arrivals got an idea of what Oklahoma's built on, but no one got the real dirt on the judging location. Only on Thursday morning was the site revealed when teams received maps to Deer Creek Farms northwest of Oklahoma City.

There, the 1,000 soil testers spread out over the pasture and gathered around 16 trenches. They lined up for a descent into the pits, where they nosed up to the carved-out soil, picked at it with pocket knives, gouged at it with fingers, measured root penetration with a

handspan, noted texture of topsoil and subsoil. Then they dropped to the grass to ponder over their marks on rating sheets.

They were looking, said Don Bartolino of the Soil Conservation Service, for characteristics relating to agricultural production, "what management practices would be needed to sustain the production of crops."

Bartolino said the knowledge will be valuable for those who grow up to stay on the farm, to graze cattle on pasture grasses, or even those who someday select a home-building lot.

The competitors studied and practiced

with hometown soil before they arrived, but still most were surprised when they dug down under Oklahoma.

"It's a different color!" said Connie Hopkins of Truth or Consequences, N.M. "It's red!"

"We don't have this red clay," said David Lett of Union Level, Va. "Here it's much leveler, not as much erosion."

In Abbeville, S.C., it's steeper and the topsoil is thinner, said Randy Risner. Would he consider putting a farm right on this Oklahoma spot?

"Yeah," he said, grinding some red clay into his palms. "I think I would."

THE DAILY OKLAHOMAN . page 2. 5/6/88

THE DAILY OKLAHOMAN . page 1. Friday, May 6, 1988