

Using fences to understand human behavior

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LAYTON — The Utah Humanities Council funded an exhibit, created by the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C., that will travel to seven smaller museums in the state and its first stop is Layton. Fences, the Smithsonian's newest traveling exhibit, tells the story of settling the U.S., establishing community, and building borders. The display will be up at the Heritage Museum of Layton from Saturday until Nov. 2.

"We are using fences to look at settlement patterns, land use, national relationships and issues with the borders," said Terri Cobb, Registrar of the Smithsonian's Museum on Main Street in Washington, D.C.

The exhibit also uses fences to make a statement about the environment around them and what different fences say about the property on which they are located.

Cobb said many times a chain link fence could be descriptive of a lower income population. White picket fences on the other hand might be found on the lawns of higher income homes.

Another section of the exhibit highlights disputes with neighbors over whose property is whose.

"The fences exhibit is a mechanism to look at human relationships," said Cobb.

Historically farmers have encouraged the building of wire fences to keep livestock off their land and ranchers have encouraged keeping fences down so their cattle and horses can have free range.

The hottest issue covered in the exhibit is the question of the United State's borders. They show large iron walls separating Mexico from the U.S. on one side and stripped portions of land without a fence to separate Canada from the U.S.

Cobb hopes the exhibit will bring in county residents so they will be able to see some of the local history and artifacts.

The purpose of the exhibit is to get people to recognize through art things they did not see before.

"Fences are usually overlooked, but they have a lot deeper meaning than people often realize," said Cobb.

"I want people to go home and look at their landscape and figure out why the fences are there and what they are there for."

The Smithsonian group has three traveling exhibits displayed around the nation. The themes of the other two exhibits are food and the roots of American music.

"We look for topics that have a national story and we look for humanities issues," said Cobb. "We also look at something that has an emotional pull."

Cobb said you wouldn't think that fences have an emotional pull but you ask people about experiences they have had with fences on their property and so on and you'll get a lot of conversation.

The museum's hours are Tuesday through Friday from 11 a.m. - 6 p.m. and Saturdays 1-5p.m. For more information, call 336-3930. For more information on the exhibit, visit museumonmainstreet.org.



TERRI COBB (above) with the Smithsonian Institute, explains how fences can be positive or negative depending on the circumstance. Below is a picture used in the Fences display to depict a time in the nation's earlier years.