Officials check some of the entries in one of the events at the International Robotics Competition last week in St. Louis. Members of the RoboTroop from Girl Scout Troop No. 60005, purple shirts, represented Liberal in the competition. Courtesy photo

By ROBERT PIERCE • Leader & Times For four days in late April, the Edward Jones Dome in St. Louis was filled with youth from many states and countries from all over the world.

The huge crowd was gathered for the FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) International Robotics Competition. A group of Girl Scouts from Liberal was among the teams, and leaders Michele and Jim Stoddard said the week was a week of firsts for both the local youth and adults, starting with the train ride to St. Louis.

“It was the first time for all of us,” Michele said. “They enjoyed it overall. The seats are bigger.”

The first part of the train ride took the group from Garden City to Kansas City.

“It was a double decker on the first one, and it was a single decker when we got to the second one,” Michele said. Teenagers do have a reputation for getting bored on road trips, but Michele said the girls found plenty to entertain themselves with on the train ride.

“They braided hair, and they fixed hair,” she said. “We luckily got them to sleep some. A lot of time, we would travel at night. Luckily, we didn’t have a full train, so they could have a seat to

themselves."

Michele said the initial train had left Garden City around 11 p.m. on April 23 and arrived in Kansas City around 7:30 a.m. the next morning, so most of what the group saw via train was in the dark of night.

The team next boarded a train going from Kansas City to St. Louis, and Michele said the light of the day allowed the young ladies to see the rivers of Missouri, which she said seemed "more like oceans than rivers."

The team arrived in St. Louis on Wednesday, and Jim, along with daughter, Alyssa, both of whom traveled separately to the Gateway City from the rest of the group, had the space planned for the group.

"Alyssa and Jim had went up before us," Michele said. "Alyssa had our pit ready for us when we got there. A lot of that was just meeting other teams. It was really cool to hear all the different accents. There were over 35 different countries there."

Overall, 80 teams competed in the robotics competition, and Michele said another first was seeing many of the people from foreign countries.

"It was really a great opportunity to learn a lot of different cultures, plus things in the (FIRST Lego League) program," she said.

Michele said the dome was big enough to house the populations of Liberal and Hugoton combined.

"It's a huge building," she said.

Jim called the experience a very positive one.

"I've been to different championship things, and there was nothing negative about this thing," he said. "Everyone wanted everyone to win. I was very impressed."

The group fared as expected for a first time team.

"At one time, we were 62 out of 80 teams," Michele said. "That was the second round of competition. Unfortunately, our robot had a tumble and messed up one of the wheels, and we didn't get as much. We dropped down to 72 out of 80. For a first year team and experience, the girls did really, really well."

Liberal's group was the only one from Kansas competing in the event, and Michele said the trip could not have been possible without cooperation from the Mid-America Air Museum.

"We are very gracious," she said. "It's a great partnership with Girl Scouts and the air museum. The partnership is growing, and we are learning a lot more. It was $1,000 registration fee just to

be able to compete in world, and the air museum paid that $1,000 for the Girl Scouts."

After the competition ended, robotics teams had a chance to attend a baseball game featuring the St. Louis Cardinals and Pittsburgh Pirates.

"We got to go in a little early," Jim said. "They took us down to the field, and we all got to go walk around on the track of the field. They don't you let you on the grass."

After attending the closing ceremonies, the group left St. Louis on Saturday night, April 27, arriving back in Garden City on Sunday morning. Michele said overall, the girls enjoyed the experience.

"After they finally got the initial shock of the TV cameras and how many people out of them, they had a wonderful time," she said. "They were very impressed with things. They enjoyed it. They wanted to go back."

Jim said having many people from as many countries as were seen in the Edward Jones Dome that week was also a first for the local group, as well as many others.

"There's not many places you can go where you can meet people from 35 other countries," he said. "It's impressive to just walk through the pit area and say hi to somebody and see what their accent is coming back."

Jim said in addition to the education about robotics youth received, they likewise learned something about how to help others in the process.

"You're not just helping someone else," he said. "You're helping those kids, and they're learning things that there's no chance a public education system is going to teach them in any other way."

Michele said having a local robotics program is something that needs to be taken advantage of in the community.

"It's an opportunity that we're very proud that Liberal has," she said. "It's something that could do really well for kids here in Liberal."