

Rillito Race Track  
Name of Property

Pima County, Arizona  
County and State

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### **Narrative Description**

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance of the property. Explain contributing and noncontributing resources if necessary. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, setting, size, and significant features.)

#### **Summary Paragraph**

Near the southeast corner of the intersection of First Avenue and River Road lies Tucson's unique Rillito Race Track, the birthplace of modern Quarter Horse racing and a continuing venue for both Quarter Horse and Thoroughbred racing. Originating on the Jelks Ranch in a natural desert clearing between the Rillito River and the foothills of the Santa Catalina Mountains, today's racetrack is part of a multi-use, public park that carves a refuge of relatively open land from a zone of high-density development. During two historic eras, the racetrack complex evolved to incorporate no-frills built features of earthen track, steel, concrete and block that remain in active use today, relatively unaltered, where horse races continue to be held. While the Track, co-joined Grandstand/Clubhouse and Barns are plain, utilitarian structures, the site remains a picturesque oasis at the base of the majestic Santa Catalina Mountains, in spite of nearby encroachment. Rillito Race Track has always enjoyed considerable popular support by attracting a broad cross section of Tucson's community. Its boisterous and colorful group of fans, horsemen and horses creates an incomparable Tucson tradition. On four-plus-acres just north of the race track stand the original Rukin Jelks House with attached stables, a guesthouse and a carport. In 1940 architect Frederic O. Knipe Sr. designed the buildings in the Sonoran Revival style. Forming a rectilinear-plan with enclosed courtyard, they are single-story with similar massing and burnt adobe construction. Currently, the Jelks property is a rental for Pima County and is off-limits to the public.

[In the early 1980s, as part of a citizens' effort to preserve Rillito Race Track from sale by the County, the Committee to Preserve Historic Rillito Race Track attempted to put the racetrack on the National Register. (At that time, most site improvements did not meet the fifty-year age criterion for listing.) In a process that lasted four years, Rillito's "Chute" was listed in 1986 at the national level of significance. Well-written and backed by extensive research, the nomination, however, contained a few inaccuracies that are being corrected in this submission.]

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### **Narrative Description**

#### **Setting**

The Rillito Race Track, 4502 N. First Avenue, is located on a level clearing near the banks of the Rillito River. Once within a zone of farmland and natural desert (Photo 1) today's open site is impacted by nearby commercial and high-density residential development (Photo 2). Development of this sort is rapidly encroaching all along both banks of the Rillito River and both sides of River Road, a major arterial to the north. The racetrack is no longer visible from River Road and its principal, vehicular access is from First Avenue to the west. A secondary, dirt access drive runs from River Road to the north, passing along the west side of the Jelks House/Stables complex. The racetrack facility is also accessible from a landscaped river walk to the south. The familiar burgundy and white Grandstand buildings rise up prominently against a backdrop of the majestic Santa Catalina Mountains. The visitor finds a racetrack here very little changed from its historic appearance.

Wedged between River Road and dense development on both sides, the secluded Jelks House/Stables complex is built near the north side of the racetrack. An asphalt drive on the east edge of the property serves both this complex and the Casitas Real Condominiums. There is a chain-link perimeter fence and just south of the gate, a high concrete wall along the east property line. Inside is a circular gravel driveway for access to the Jelks buildings. The property grounds are primarily earth with clusters of overgrown trees and shrubs – mostly palo verde and mesquite - and a dense growth of tamarisk trees along the south to buffer the property from the racetrack.

#### **Current Appearance**

No-frills buildings and structures of earth, steel, concrete and block appear by or near the earthen Track. Clustered on its southeastern edge is the compact, Grandstand/Clubhouse complex. To the east and west are the Barns. Outside the two major buildings are spectator circulation areas with asphalt drives and parking areas beyond. The Grandstand is joined to

Rillito Race Track

Name of Property

Pima County, Arizona

County and State

the Clubhouse by a second-level, enclosed Bridge beneath which is a divided Breezeway for public entry and an equine course that connects the Track to the saddling Paddock. Within the complex, the seating stands, the paved viewing space along the rail, plus the betting and food service counters are closely related and connected by good public circulation. The facility is built to ensure conviviality and clear visibility for approximately 7,500 spectators.

The Jelks House/Stables complex is currently occupied by a tenant and not accessible for observation.

### Resource Count

The following major features comprise the Rillito Race Track Historic District. Dates have been determined from aerial photographs, title records and other reliable sources. See Historic District Resources Map (Map 3).

Track – includes Chute plus Oval (1943 or earlier; Oval enlarged at west end by 1954.)

Grandstand/Clubhouse (late 1953; early 1954).

Judge's Stand (late 1953/early 1954).

Paddock/Breezeway (late 1953/early 1954).

Jockey's Building ((late 1953/early 1954).

Permanent Barns: Barn D, Barn E, Barn F ((late 1953/early 1954 to 1960).

Pre-engineered Barns: Barn G, Barn I, Barn J, Barn K, Barn L, Barn M (1992 and post 2006).

Plaza/Concession Building (2006).

Camera Stands: Camera Stand A, Camera Stand B (probably (late 1953/early 1954 – too small to be visible on aerial).

Gatehouse ((late 1953/early 1954).

Jelks Courtyard (1940)

Jelks House (1940)

Jelks Stables (1940)

Jelks Guesthouse (c. 1950)

Jelks Carport (c. 1940)

There are sixteen (16) contributing buildings and structures in the Rillito Race Track Historic District. Contributing structures include the Track, Paddock/Breezeway, Judge's Stand, Camera Stand A, Camera Stand B, Jelks Courtyard and Jelks Carport. Contributing buildings include the Grandstand/Clubhouse, Jockeys' Building, Barn D, Barn E, Barn F, Gatehouse, Jelks House, Jelks Stables and Jelks Guesthouse. These features meet the age requirements for National Register listing (see Integrity).

There are seven (7) non-contributing buildings in the historic district including Barn G, Barn I, Barn J, Barn K, Barn L, Barn M and Plaza/Concession Building. These recently installed features do not meet the age requirement for National Register listing.

**(1) Track:** The Track (Chute plus Oval) has a special, prepared earth surface, carefully graded (Photo 3). The Chute is forty-five feet wide and 3/8 of a mile (660 yards) long with a level surface. The distance around the Oval is 5/8 mile and its surface is slightly banked on the turns. For Quarter Horse racing the Chute merges with the Oval on the straightaway up to the finish line in front of the Grandstand. The first curve of the Oval then functions as a "run-out" where the horses brake after the race (see Section 8).

There are three black and white striped distance markers along the Chute and ten furlong markers along the Oval. These posts are about 8" in diameter and about 8'-0" high, set back about 8'-0" from the inside rail. Originally horse pasture, today's infield contains the central Plaza/Concession Building and soccer fields.

White pipe rails with offset pipe posts line both sides of the Track. At the west end of the Chute is an open section with a removable wood rail for access. Simple and utilitarian, the Track's rail structure consists of horizontal steel pipe, 40" above grade, supported by steel posts in concrete. In 1988, Fontana Safety Rail was installed on the inside rail of the Oval. The safety cover, consisting of white, aluminum-based, rubberized wrapping, was screwed to the steel structure. The safety rail is covering and a necessary, compatible rehabilitation that does not detract from the integrity of the Track.

The Track (Chute plus Oval) was on site by 1943, converted from a stud-farm training track. During the historic era, the Oval was banked for safety reasons and also lengthened at the west end from its original 1/2 mile length (Haskell 1944) to its present length by February 1954 (Photo 15).

Rillito Race Track  
Name of Property

Pima County, Arizona  
County and State

**(2) Grandstand/Clubhouse:** The dual-level, co-joined Grandstand/Clubhouse building primarily serves spectators, with the Clubhouse providing more amenities. Built in late 1953 and early 1954, both the Grandstand and Clubhouse were connected sometime before 1960 by a second story, enclosed "Bridge" (Photo 4). Spectators enter the Grandstand, the largest feature on site, through a ticket booth on the south. The upper level contains tiered, wood bench seating for 3,000 spectators (Photo 5). The lower level has pari-mutuel betting windows, food and bar facilities, racetrack offices and storage spaces. There are timing and photo finish facilities in a removable tower attached to the north side of the Grandstand.

The exterior of the Grandstand is noteworthy for its imposing, corrugated-metal-clad, barrel-arched roof that appears to overhang on the north and south sides. Below is a plain, concrete block base. The open, tiered seating is visible from the outside. This functional building allows full spectator viewing of the Track through a glass and steel-tube, curtain-wall screen. Its open-frame, steel structural system supports seating tiers and the barrel roof. Non-bearing, concrete block walls and partitions partially close in the lower level which is about eleven feet above grade.

The arched, steel-truss roof is supported by three rows of steel columns placed at the rear of the Grandstand, in front of the seating tiers, and at the north edge where the roof overhangs. Wood purlins extend across the steel trusses to support the corrugated metal roof. Steel-plated risers and treads create tiers that rise up to the south, supported underneath by a system of steel girders and beams. Simple wood-plank seats with light steel supports are attached to the steel treads.

The Clubhouse can seat approximately 650 patrons comfortably at tables or on chairs which rent daily or seasonally. Here there is a full-service bar and kitchen and horse murals on the walls. There is an ample zone for four-seat table seating plus an individual seating area near the pari-mutuel counter at the west end (Photo 6). The lower level of the Clubhouse contains racetrack offices and storage facilities. The enclosed, connecting Bridge serves as a spectator lounge.

The two-story Clubhouse and second-story Bridge are supported by a system of steel columns, beams, bar-joists and steel decking. Concrete masonry units enclose exterior wall areas. Apparently the 1953 Clubhouse was modified on the north side by a faceted second-story extension sometime after 1960. The current viewing area is enclosed by an aluminum-frame, glass curtain wall system between steel columns. On the east end of the Clubhouse is a gabled, wood-framed, second-story extension supported below by steel pipe columns.

The Grandstand portion and the flat-roofed Bridge remain relatively unaltered. Initial glazing of the Grandstand occurred during the historic era but it has since been re-glazed. The more recent Clubhouse modification occurs on the north façade and is not visible from the south entry façade. Constituting a minor percentage of the co-joined building's envelope, this latter modification does not compromise integrity.

**(3) Judge's Stand:** Apparently installed around the end of 1953 or beginning of 1954, when many improvements appeared on site, this structure is aligned with the Track finish and the Chute (Photo 7). It is a two-person, corrugated metal enclosure about 20'-0" above grade supported on a light steel framework.

**(4) Paddock/Breezeway:** Also built during the late 1953/early 1954 time period, the Paddock is located just south of and between the Grandstand and the Clubhouse (Photo 8). Lining the south side of its earthen enclosure is a curved, open-front, concrete block shed containing eleven saddling stalls. The 16'-0" wide Breezeway extends under the Bridge and connects the Paddock to the Track. The Paddock/Breezeway is a contributing structure.

**(5) Jockeys' Building:** Also pertaining to the late 1953/early 1954 time period, this plain, 1890-square-foot, rectangular-plan building is located adjacent to and just west of the Paddock. This unaltered building contains showers, changing and toilet facilities for male and female jockeys plus an office and storage area.

**(6) Permanent Barns:** At present, three permanent barns, Barn D, Barn E and Barn F, remain on site. These Barns were built by February 1954 or shortly thereafter. While Barns E and F are in good condition, Barn D is in very poor condition. According to Assessors' Records, there were nine permanent barns in 1967. Grouped together on the western zone of the property, five of these were in place by 1960. In recent years six permanent barns have been demolished by the County.

The gabled, block buildings are typical, elongated, racetrack barns with canopies formed by the gable eaves on either longitudinal side. Each building is divided by a central, block, spine wall with stalls along both sides of the spine facing outward. The gable roofs extend beyond each end to enclose a breezeway and a tack room (called "bunk house" on assessors' records).

Rillito Race Track

Name of Property

Pima County, Arizona

County and State

Barn F typifies the permanent, back-to-back, racetrack barn found on site (Photo 9). It is a fifty-stall barn with twenty-five stalls on each side. The barn measures 22'-0" by 267'-0." It is built of concrete masonry units with two-by-four wood trusses, tongue-and-groove sheathing and corrugated metal roofing. Each eave overhangs to form a canopy over an eight-foot wide, open, dirt circulation path along each longitudinal side. Painted pipe columns support the outer edge of each canopy roof.

Under the same roof, separated from the stable block by a breezeway at each end is a 10'-6" by 38'- 0" block unit partitioned into four identical rooms by plywood-clad frame walls. The block units are wide enough to end the canopied circulation paths. The back-to-back organization of Barn F is provided by the central, longitudinal block wall capped by plywood-clad framing to the ridge. Separating the individual, 10'-0" by 10'-6" stalls is an array of identical block walls. The stall floors are earth.

Each longitudinal barn façade is punctuated by a row of identical, evenly-spaced, four-foot wide doors with three-foot high, wrought iron bar gates, painted red brown. The block walls are 8'-2 ½" high. Each end unit has flush panel doors that face inward along the breezeway. The gable ends are textured plywood painted red brown. The walls and undersides of the eaves are painted cream white. Barn F is in good condition and has been well maintained.

Barn E is also one of the earliest features on the site. It is in good condition. It has a somewhat different plan from Barn F by comprising two separated stall blocks and a small jockey-room block at the east end only, all under a common gabled roof. There are thirty-eight stalls in the major portion and eight stalls in the minor portion. Barn D is currently in very poor condition and fenced off by chain linking. It differs on its west end for it includes a larger, block room with a porch on posts. The trim of the building is painted blue, not burgundy.

**(7) Pre-engineered Barns:** Barns G, I, J, K, L and M are utilitarian buildings assembled on site from prefabricated components by Port-A-Stall of Arizona (see Section 8). Established in 1968, Port-A-Stall manufactures components for barns, stalls and other features for animal housing needs. Rillito's Port-A-Stall Barns were installed during two eras. Most appeared around October 1992 but extensions (to Barns G, I and J) or new buildings, Barn K, have been added since 2006 (White 2008.) (Photo 10.) The Pre-engineered Barns are non-contributors.

Typically, these gable-roofed, burgundy and white metal Barns are arranged in the "back-to-back" configuration characteristic of racetrack horse stall designs, without a central aisle or side porches. Barn L, however, has a flat, slightly sloped roof with eight stalls, each 12'-6" square, on either side of a 12'-0" wide central aisle. The two Barns located east of the Track are for veterinary purposes.

**(8) Plaza/Concession Building:** Of recent construction (built prior to June 2006) and therefore a non-contributor, is a concrete strip upon which sits a small, block concession building. Oriented on a northeast-southwest axis, the strip bisects the infield of the Track. These features are used for racetrack ceremonies and alternative uses.

**(9) Camera Stands:** Camera Stand A and Camera Stand B are identical, red, box-shaped features mounted on ten-foot-high pipe columns, spaced along the back stretch of the Track's Oval. During racing season these features hold photo flash race markers. Although their vintage cannot be verified, the stands appear to have been built during the 1953/1954 period and to meet the fifty-year age criterion for National Register listing. Thus they are contributing structures.

**(10) Gatehouse:** Also of the early 1950s era, this small building is located on the northwest corner of the First Avenue automobile access to the Rillito Race Track property. It is a ninety-six square-foot, nine foot high, rectangular-plan building, placed on skids. It is painted burgundy and white and has plywood siding, one door and aluminum sliding windows.

**(11) Jelks Courtyard:** Architect Frederick O. Knipe Sr. designed the cohesive, mortar-washed burnt-adobe complex in the Sonoran Revival style for the J. Rukin Jelks family and several prize horses about this central, rectilinear-plan courtyard. Built in 1940, the Jelks House embraced the southeast corner of the courtyard while the Jelks Stables enclosed the opposite corner. Just north of the residence, a walled service court bordered the east courtyard wall. The Jelks Guesthouse was added at the northeast end. The courtyard was not only an organizational feature but a tree-shaded oasis. Today several mature mesquites remain. The courtyard is a contributing structure. (Map 4.)

Rillito Race Track

Name of Property

Pima County, Arizona

County and State

**(12) Jelks House:** The 1940 residence is a simple Sonoran Revival style dwelling with low parapets and a compact form. The Jelks House is a contributing building. The footprint consists of rectangular, setback units that step around the southeast courtyard corner. The house is built of mortar-washed burnt adobe with low parapets capped by double brick. Metal roof drains (*canales*) penetrate the parapets. The main entry is at the southeast corner through a low-wall enclosed entry court. Just south of the entrance is a small, decorative-metal, hitching post and wrought iron lamp on a mesquite stump. A shade *ramada* stands adjacent to the rear façade of the house. Most windows are steel casements painted blue. The exterior doors are mostly dark-stained wood plank with wood lintels. The 1,850-square-foot residence contains a living room, dining room, kitchen, hallway, and two bedroom suites. Materials in the public areas include brick floors, plastered burnt adobe walls and saguaro rib ceilings above hewn beams.

**(13) Jelks Stables:** In keeping with the house, the 1940 stables building has a low compact form, mortar-washed burnt-adobe brick walls with brick-capped parapets and projecting log *vigas* and metal *canales*. This contributing building features six box-stalls, two feed storage rooms, an office and a tack room on either side of a wide central corridor. Each stall has an opening with a wood lintel, frame, and shutters. The interior walls are either painted plaster or painted burnt adobe. The stable floors are dirt with the exception of an office in the southeast corner, which has brick flooring. The ceiling is log beams supporting saguaro ribs. In the tack room are rustic, built-in log saddle-racks. A rectilinear space serving as living quarters for a groom projects from the southwest end of the stable.

**(14) Jelks Guesthouse:** The guesthouse is a small, contributing building located at the northeast end of the central courtyard, north of the service courtyard. It is similar in construction and appearance to the main house.

**(15) Jelks Carport:** The two-bay carport is located in the southeast corner of the property, outside of the courtyard and its buildings. This contributing carport structure is built of log posts and beams.

## CURRENT FUNCTIONS

The total attendance for the ten-day 2011 race season was 46,384. The average daily attendance was 4,638. The total attendance for the nine-day 2010 season was 47,616 with the average daily being 5,291. On February 22, 2009, the last day of that year's season, 10,222 people came to watch the races at Rillito. The parking lots were jammed and the crowd was boisterous. On February 24, 2008, 9,300 people came to watch the horses run at Rillito. Elsewhere in Tucson, the Tucson Rodeo, the Gem and Mineral Show and the Tucson Golf Tournament were also held on that day. Much of Rillito's enthusiastic support comes from Tucson's Hispanic community whose members share horse racing as part of their cultural heritage. (Moore 2008.)

As well as horse racing, the Rillito Race Track is and has been an appropriate venue for alternative-use, community activities. Soccer fields are maintained within the infield of the Track Oval and in the northwest corner of the property. The University of Arizona's Spring Fling, Arts and Crafts Fairs, a Native American Inter-tribal Pow-Wow, the Tucson Celtic Festival and dog shows number among activities annually held at the site.

For example, on October 26, 2008, a noncompetitive walk, "2008 Making Strides Against Breast Cancer of Tucson!" was staged from the Track infield. Rillito's parking areas were filled to capacity and the infield teamed with pink balloons, live music, booths and activity. In December, 2008, when the nearby town of Marana, Arizona, suddenly had to cancel "Miracle in Marana," its annual toy-distribution event, Rillito Race Track provided the venue.

## Integrity

The Rillito Race Track Historic District exhibits good integrity. The track layout and the contributing buildings and structures have experienced very few modifications throughout the years. The Jelks complex buildings and structures also appear to be intact. Non-contributing resources are non-major features that fit compatibly into the district. In its unique setting, the racetrack not only continues its historic function but retains the authenticity of its historic identity in spite of recent, nearby, commercial and high-density residential development. Changes since the period of significance (1943-1964), like alterations to buildings and the recent removal or addition of resources, have neither been extensive nor visually discordant. Integrity categories are as follows:

Location: Rillito Race Track has retained its integrity of location and racing continues where it began.

Design: Buildings and structures at Rillito are functionally designed and utilitarian. "Form follows function" is the rule. Except for the loss of Permanent Barns, the general design aspects in the historic district have remained intact. Building

Rillito Race Track

Name of Property

Pima County, Arizona

County and State

alterations comprise necessary rehabilitations or, like the glazed addition to the north façade of the Clubhouse, are not extensive enough to compromise integrity. The installation of the rubberized safety rail to the Track is also a necessary, compatible rehabilitation.

The removal or addition of elongated, gabled barns in areas where barns of this vernacular form have traditionally existed is not visually discordant. However removal of Permanent Barns certainly diminishes the integrity of the fringes of the racetrack complex.

Setting: The open, oasis-like setting of the racetrack between the Rillito River and the foothills of the Catalina Mountains retains its historic character. Likewise, the striking view of the Catalinas to the north remains to inspire all who participate in the sport of horseracing at Rillito Race Track.

Materials: The historic district has maintained good integrity of its original, basic materials: earth, concrete, concrete block, burnt adobe, steel and wood. Most repairs, like replacement glazing, are done using the same material. Aluminum has been introduced with some minor window installation.

Workmanship: The workmanship at Rillito is standard, utilitarian and sound. Everything from the Track surface and the Barns, with their back-to-back stalls, to the tier-seated Grandstand expresses functionality and standard-quality workmanship. The workmanship at the Jelks complex is architect-designed to look regionally rustic using local materials like burnt adobe and mesquite logs.

Feeling: Rillito Race Track certainly retains its historic feeling. Fans claim they much prefer the convivial atmosphere at this historic facility than at any upscale, modern racetrack. It is difficult to express in words the feeling when the parking lots overflow and the facility is filled to capacity with a boisterous, colorful, perpetually-moving crowd cheering horses across the finish line. At quieter times, on non-race days the visitor experiences the tranquility of the beautiful setting and feels at one with Tucson's history.

Association: With its remarkable setting and no-frills, intact structures and buildings plus its nearby residential complex, the Rillito Race Track retains a strong association with its historic past both for its initial association with Quarter Horse racing and its continuing association with Quarter Horse and Thoroughbred racing.