

Rillito Race Track
Name of Property

Pima County, Arizona
County and State

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION

AGRICULTURE

Period of Significance

1940-1964

Significant Dates

1940, 1943

1953/54

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

N/A

Period of Significance (justification)

The period of significance is 1940 to 1964. This time span includes the date J. Rukin Jelks built his house complex, the date Rillito opened for Quarter Horse racing and extends to the date that the facility suffered a four-year cessation of operation, one of several to occur during the blustering and very colorful history of the Rillito Race Track. (Other names given to the racetrack at various times were Rillito Park and Rillito Downs.)

Criteria Considerations (explanation, if necessary)

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance and applicable criteria.)

Tucson's Rillito Race Track Historic District is eligible for National Register listing at the local level under Criterion A for its initial association with modern, regulated Quarter Horse racing in the United States and for its continuing association with Quarter Horse and Thoroughbred racing. The Track includes an oval plus the Chute, the earliest feature and the one most closely associated with Quarter Horse racing. In 1986, the Chute was nominated to the National Register at the national level of significance. The intact Jelks House/Stables complex pre-dates the founding era. The race track buildings are associated with a somewhat later historic era. Rillito Race Track is the documented birthplace of organized Quarter Horse racing in the nation and, in fact, the world. Pioneer Tucson horse breeders and American Quarter Racing Association (AQRA) founders Mel Haskell, Bob Locke, J. Rukin Jelks, and Jake Meyer, immortalized as the "4 Horsemen," instituted the "chute" system at Rillito. This system, the template upon which all Quarter Horse racing is based, integrated a straightaway into an oval track with technical innovations to create a unique style of short distance racing for a uniquely American horse type. An unregistered breed until the 1940s, the robust Quarter Horse was and remains the fastest horse on earth for short-distance racing. Dedicated to the improvement of the Quarter Horse, Mel Haskell and company produced their own champion race horses by selective breeding, based on performance, and cross-breeding with Thoroughbred stock. From Rillito, regulated Quarter Horse racing rapidly evolved into a major regional, then national sport. Today, as in the past, Rillito Race Track holds both Quarter Horse and Thoroughbred races. The facility experiences considerable popular support and attracts a broad cross section of Tucson's community.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

Introduction

Founded in 1943 by four wealthy horsemen who made Tucson their home, Rillito Race Track combined a straightaway with an oval to produce the ideal track for modern, short distance, Quarter Horse running. The "4 Horsemen" also perfected technical innovations like the photo finish device which became standards for modern Quarter Horse racing. They established the American Quarter Racing Association (AQRA) to serve as the "Jockey Club" for Quarter Horse racing. With modifications, the AQRA's rules and regulations are still in effect today under the Racing Division of the American Quarter Horse Association.

As horse breeders with stud farms, Tucson's 4-Horsemen bred their own Quarter Horses with emphasis on performance rather than conformation. In 1940, one of the four, J. Rukin Jelks, allowed racing at his stud farm on the training track that would become the Rillito Race Track. To these horsemen, a good Quarter Horse excelled at short-distance running, whether used in cutting, reining or racing. Early on, by cross-breeding Thoroughbreds with Quarter Horses [and thereby conflicting with the fledgling American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA)], they contributed to the improvement of the racing Quarter Horse.

American Quarter Horse Racing

While the breed association (AQHA) was not organized until 1940, there being no prior stud book or registry, the Quarter Horse itself represents an old type. The name originated from its speed in quarter mile races. The ancestry of the American Quarter Horse is predominantly a mix of the Spanish Horse and the British Thoroughbred.

Spaniards brought the Arab-Barb (predominantly Barb) into the New World. Beyond the earlier Roman influence that had introduced the Oriental horse into Spain, the Moorish invasion of A.D. 711 brought another influx. A flourishing horse culture developed in Andalusia that perfected the Spanish Horse. Due to the rigorous demands placed on this strain, by 1492 it was without peer in Europe. (Laune 1973.) Modern organized racing and the Thoroughbred originated in the British Isles and the British brought horse racing with them into the Colonies. Genealogically, all Thoroughbreds can be traced in male lineage from three Oriental stallions brought to England in the early 18th century: the Byerly Turk, the Darley Arabian and the Godolphin Barb. (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* "Horse Racing..." 1969.)

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In the 1600s, eastern seaboard colonists began to cross imported English Thoroughbreds with Native American horses (descendants of the Spanish horse). One of the most famous sires was Janus, a Thoroughbred grandson of the Godolphin Barb foaled in 1746 and brought to colonial Virginia in 1756. The influence of Janus and others contributed genes crucial to the "Celebrated American Quarter Running Horse." The resulting horse was small, hardy and quick and was used as a work horse during the week and a race horse on the weekends.

Mel Haskell wrote his own eloquent version of the history of Quarter Horse Racing in the 1944 Year Book for the Southern Arizona Horse Breeders' Association:

Horse racing has been going on in America since soon after the first "Gentlemen" landed in the Colony of Virginia and set up their plantations. It started long before the first English "Thoroughbreds" were imported and long distance, oval tracks constructed. Saddle ponies were "matched" and raced down village streets, or on short straightaway courses laboriously chopped out of virgin forests, even before the forest trails were dignified by the name of roads.

Because of the conditions under which they were run, these races were seldom at distances beyond a quarter mile and came to be known as "Quarter Races." The top horses that competed in them were known as "Quarter Running Horses" or "Quarter Horses."

Because the Quarter Horse was used for work as well as sport – because he could be trained for a short race by his owner without expensive equipment or professional help – because, in short, he was the "poor man's race horse" and could be raced anywhere that a quarter mile of level open ground could be found, Quarter Racing has persisted throughout the history of America. As it lost popularity in the East it spread West with the frontier and gained a permanent foothold in the range country of the Southwest where the Quarter Horse was accepted as the ideal Cowhorse – the only type of saddle horse that still plays a vital part in our modern mechanical economy.

The Tradition of Quarter Racing is colorful – if not always honorable. Matches between famous racers in colonial Virginia attracted onlookers from miles around and were an excuse for a day of merry-making and sometimes rowdy celebration. In the crowd along the "paths" could be seen the Cavalier and his Negro slave, sporting Parson and Privateer, New England Puritan, New Amsterdam Hollander, wilderness Hunter in coon-skin cap and "Native American" in feathered head-dress. That picture has not changed much in nearly three centuries. A big match race in the Southwest today is often accompanied by a barbecue and all-day Fiesta. The crowd, with Ranchers and Farmers, city Sports and Cowboys, Mexicans and Indians, has not lost all of its color. Feeling has always run high – the stake might consist of everything an owner possessed – the public has always backed its favorites heavily.

The Quarter Horse has always excelled in two factors, utility and speed. The continued quality of the horse is founded in "early foot" (also called "quick burn" or "early speed") meaning the ability to run at full speed inside three jumps from a flat-footed start (Nye 1964). This ability is perpetuated through the skill of breeding bests to bests. A good Quarter Horse has attributes of consistent reproduction of ability and conformation resulting from focused selective breeding (Denhardt 1959). Some individuals have been clocked at up to fifty-five miles per hour (Wikipedia 2008). The holders of most short distance records have always been Quarter Horses with considerable Thoroughbred blood.

The Founding Years – Hacienda Moltacqua (1941-1943)

While unregulated Quarter Horse Racing had been popular in Tucson since cattle and cowhorses were first brought to Arizona, experimental attempts to formalize the sport were launched in 1941 at Hacienda Moltacqua in Tucson, Arizona, by the Southern Arizona Horse Breeders' Association (SAHBA). The most prominent members were the original "4 Horsemen," Melville H. Haskell, Robinson ("Bob") C. Locke, Jefferson Rukin Jelks, and A. M. "Jake" Meyer. The title "4 Horsemen" was granted to the founders by Nelson Nye, author and world authority on Quarter Horses (Nye 1973).

These four horsemen came to Tucson in the 1920s from wealthy, non-Arizona families that had been immersed in horse culture and racing. As health seekers (both young Haskell and Jelks came to Arizona to recover from tuberculosis), or for other reasons, the gentlemen bought farms and cattle ranches near Tucson where they began to breed fine horses.

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Southern Arizona was considered ideal horse country. Ranches located in the rough foothills had rocky, limestone pastures and strong native grasses, ideal conditions for producing cowhorses with strong bones and good feet (Haskell 1943).

In 1932 Tucson's first livestock show took place in a lot across from the prestigious Arizona Inn. There being no official Quarter Horse breed at that time, judges differed in which horses they thought should place (Wooddancer 1981). Informal challenge horse races had become very popular at Bob Locke's west-side ranch and participants like Haskell and Jelks were piqued that first prize winners in races did not place in shows. They believed that proper Quarter Horse conformation would come through breeding a horse that could also run.

[Haskell, for example, started crossing Thoroughbreds with Quarter Horses very early in his breeding program. He believed in cross-breeding and claimed that he fought for it for years although he was nearly run out of the American Quarter Horse Association for his views. By using top Thoroughbred sires and good mares, Haskell's Rincon Stock Farm, founded in 1937, became a premier horse operation. (Waldrup 1984). Ariel Lady was Haskell's pride when she ran at Rillito and afterwards became a considerably noted broodmare. She was possibly the greatest producer of outstanding running Quarter stock ever known up to the mid-1960s (Nye 1964). Rukin Jelks also bred champions from his stock farm including Queeny, Little Queeny, Piggin String and Rukin String. Quarter Horse literature abounds with data about such champions.]

In 1941, due to the popularity of informal racing at his Ajo Way property, Bob Locke decided to build a racetrack northeast of Tucson called Hacienda Moltacqua (Italian for "much water"). Primarily for harness racing, the one-half mile oval track was modified by the addition of one-eighth and one-quarter mile straightaway chutes to accommodate Quarter Horse racing. Longer races were run around one turn.

Participants who worked to make Quarter Horse racing an "ever more popular and sporting amateur pastime" included Haskell who, as Secretary, wrote the Association's first year book, *Racing Quarter Horses* (1943). Bob Locke was steward and starter, Rukin Jelks was track operator and Jake Meyer served as announcer, steward and starter. Ardent horseman C. C. (Clancy) Wollard became president of the SAHBA for 1943.

An SAHBA director and old-time cowboy, Joe Flieger, started the Quarter Horse Speed Trials when he said "Let's stop *talking* about how fast we *think* our horses can run and *find out* what they really can do!" Hence the motto of the SAHBA became "AN OUNCE OF PERFORMANCE IS WORTH A POUND OF HOT AIR" (Haskell 1943).

In 1941 there were nine race meetings at Moltacqua including the First Annual Quarter Horse Speed Trials. By 1943, there was racing nearly every Sunday afternoon, twenty-five meetings in all, with three races each meeting for Quarter Horses. Quarter Horse Speed Trials were held and the top Quarter Horses in the country could compete for title of "World's Champion Racing Quarter Horse." (Haskell 1943.)

Racehorses came from all over Arizona and out-of-state to earn track records at Moltacqua. The record winners had colorful names like Shue Fly, Nobodies Friend and Red Racer. Red Racer, a useful, racing cowhorse, was owned and bred by Mel Haskell at his Rincon Stock Farm. New Mexico-bred Shue Fly, a racing Quarter Horse of "classic quality," was the 1942 World's Champion.

Organized Racing at Rillito Race Track (1943-1949)

During the 1940s, Tucson became the Quarter Horse capital of the world. At the end of the 1943 racing season, Bob Locke sold the Moltacqua property and Rukin Jelks then offered the use of a training track at his stud farm north of the Rillito River. Adapted specially for the Quarter Horse, the new Rillito Track was operated by the Tucson Racing Association. Here the SAHBA and Tucson Racing Association organized the American Quarter Racing Association (AQRA), an association like the "Jockey Club" for Thoroughbred racing. The AQRA defined what a "Quarter Running Horse" was, promoted good sportsmanship, and tested and refined innovations that became standards for the sport. Under the aegis of the AQRA, Quarter Horse racing grew monumentally as member tracks sprang up throughout the Southwest and beyond.

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During the first season at Rillito (1943-1944) the Tucson Racing Association put on 125 races for Quarter Horses on twenty-four Sunday afternoons, in which 130 horses participated. A most popular venue from the start, Tucson's early Rillito Race Track featured very modest amenities (Photo 11). Improvements like a grandstand and clubhouse were promised as soon as World War II ended.

It was a pretty colorful track then with years old cottonwoods, benches, and a pasture in the middle where brood mares were grazing. All the big wig people were interested in horses. Easterners just loved it. Truck loads of dude ranchers would come in and get jolly kicks." (Smelker in Wooddancer 1981.)

Van Smelker worked as a steward at Rillito while attending the University of Arizona. He remembered the excitement of the early days. With a war going on, Rillito was something of a shoestrapping operation.

We had a 660-yard straightaway and a half-mile oval track. The finish line was almost to the turn, and many horses jumped the rail instead of taking the turn" (Jennings 1973).

The track width on the straightaway was forty-five feet but narrowed to thirty feet on the turn. Smelker declared that "(i)t was pretty hair-raising to watch a group of horses go into that turn." The turns were eventually banked to encourage horses to stay on the ground and between the rails. (Chamberlain 2006.)

The 4 Horsemen were prime creators of the American Quarter Racing Association, formally organized February 1, 1945. Initial officers and directors included fifteen men and women representing breeders associations, owner/breeders and developing member tracks in California, Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Oklahoma and as far away as Florida. The mission of the Association was to promote the racing of horses at the short distances traditional to the sport of Quarter Racing.

The goal of the AQRA was to promulgate uniform standards of competition and rules and regulations that could be enforced by member tracks. It was to distribute information to racing secretaries to promote a high standard of fairness and honesty in races run at recognized tracks, for previously the sport had been rife with "trickery, foul riding and ...race fixing" (Haskell 1944). Furthermore, it was to maintain a classified registry "for racing purposes" to insure positive identification of competing horses. (Nye 1973.)

Primarily written by Secretary Mel Haskell, the AQRA published an annual Year Book and Register of Merit to list all horses that earned the right to be known as "Quarter Running Horses." Perused today, these archival booklets are treasures of anecdotal information, meticulous documentation and amazing photography. Much of the following information is summarized from the Year Books, published from 1943 until 1949. By 1949, the AQRA had merged with and become the racing division of the American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA).

The AQRA stipulated that all horses competing at member tracks be properly identified and registered. The registration certificate had no value except as a permit to start on a recognized track. There were no requirements in regard to breed, sex, age or color. Performance alone was the qualification of a Quarter Running Horse - any horse - irrespective of breeding - that could run a quarter mile fast enough to be worthy of the name. The AQRA stressed that the importance of pedigrees was greatly exaggerated compared to conformation and ability to get the job done.

[Until 1949, the AQRA did not always agree with the AQHA which had been organized in 1940 to make the "type" known as the Quarter Horse into a "breed" with a distinct utilitarian purpose. By experience, the AQRA believed that horses developed on tracks produced superior cowhorses when crossed with hardy native mares of the Southwest cattle country (Haskell 1946). Breeders like Haskell firmly believed in cross-breeding with Thoroughbred stock to produce racers. The AQRA wished not to conflict but to cooperate with the AQHA for the good of the sport and improvement of the Quarter Horse.]

To Haskell the Quarter Horse was the "poor man's race horse" since anyone who could afford to keep a saddle horse for pleasure riding could afford to race one. In addition, Quarter Horse racing was a sport conducted by amateurs. There were no professional race track employees at Rillito. Local horse breeders, cattlemen or sportsmen directed the races. An accountant employed elsewhere ran the pari-mutuel department in compliance with the State Tax Commission. Sellers and cashiers, men of "excellent reputation," were commonly employees of local banks and business houses. Most of the

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net derived from the mutuels was distributed in purses. Haskell considered this kind of racing a true sport with wide amateur appeal.

At Rillito, the straightaway “chute” system was perfected (Photo 12). Quarter Horse races took place on the specially designed Track in which the straight Chute merged with the straightaway of the Oval, the curve of which then served for “pulling up” or braking, after the race. On line from a true standing start in a closed mechanical gate, each Quarter Horse was required to run straight from the starting position so as not to bump or interfere with another horse. The finish line was located on the straightaway not far from the first turn at the east end, close to its current location. [Since Quarter Horses continue to run beyond the finish line, the Oval’s curve slows them because they must change leads in turning. At this point they start to “give up” mentally and slow down (Matthews 2009). The Oval has always been used before and after the race for assembly, warm-up, cool-down and for training and exercise during the week.]

To ensure closer matches in races, a system of graded handicaps was worked out. There were two weight-for-age scales, a lightweight gauge for race-bred horses and a heavyweight for stock-type horses. Since most Quarter Horses had a higher value as cow horses than they did as racehorses, “claiming races” wouldn’t work. (Chamberlain 2006.) A claiming race was a race in which the losing horse could be claimed afterward for a previously stated price, while the winner had to be auctioned off to the highest bidder (Laune 1973).

In 1946 Haskell portrayed a Tucson-centric view of Quarter Racing. Geographically located at the “center of interest,” Rillito was the “logical meeting place” for top horses from all over the Southwest (Photo 13). Here the dates of the World’s Championship Quarter Horse Speed Trials had been set to ensure the participation of all champions. One important function of the AQRA was to establish integrated “circuits” by cooperation between member tracks. The Texas-New Mexico circuit included Raton, Albuquerque, El Paso and Eagle Pass. The Nevada-California circuit included Reno, Salinas, King City and Corona.

By 1947, the following race tracks were affiliates of the AQRA: 1) Albuquerque NM (Fair Grounds), 2) Arrowhead Park, Houston TX, 3) Corona CA, 4) Cowboy Park, El Paso TX, 5) Del Rio TX, 6) Eagle Pass TX, 7) Hollywood Park, Ruidoso NM, 8) Inglewood CA 9) Raton NM, 10) Reno NV, 11) Rillito AZ, 12) Salinas CA and (13) Winkelman AZ. By this time, the AQRA had grown to include 446 members. Over 1,200 head of horses had been registered. Because of the admission of new tracks, competition now occurred on a year-round basis. (Haskell 1947.)

Drawing from coast to coast but primarily from the Southwest, the top Quarter Running Horses in the country raced at Rillito Race Track (Photo 14). Some outstanding mares and stallions included on the list were Stella Moore, Miss Panama, Hard Twist, Bart B S, Piggins String, Shue Fly, Queenie, Clabber, Joe Reed II, Squaw H, Barbara L, Joe Tom, Joe Hancock, Pelican, Waggoner’s Rainy Day and Nobodies Friend – just a few of the greats that came down the chute. “It was horses, not copper, that opened up Tucson and put its name in the sporting pages from one end of the country to the other” (Nye 1973).

Rillito was a testing ground for many ideas that became standard such as Quarter Horse futurities, derbies and stake races and was the first track to get pari-mutuel wagering (Jennings 1973.) During the 1947-1948 racing season, Rillito put to use the first photo-electric timer which, it was hoped, would be adopted by member tracks. Van Smelker explained how the photo-electric timer worked. A high-speed clock was placed next to the track, right on the finish line. A movie camera was mounted up in the judge’s stand. Smelker would switch on the clock when the horses started. When the horses got close to the finish line, he switched on the camera that was focused upon the clock and finish line. The camera kept running until all horses had crossed the line. Officials would then develop the film and look at it frame by frame. (Jennings n.d.)

By 1948, the AQRA boasted more than 700 members, over 2,100 registered horses and twenty-two member tracks in Arizona, California, Nevada, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas. The AQRA dissolved in March 1950 and joined the newly formed Racing Division of the American Quarter Horse Association. Mel Haskell was now president of the Racing Division and Van Smelker, the Secretary-Treasurer. From this point on registration was handled by the AQHA in Amarillo, Texas. On March 5, 1950, the Board of Directors of the AQHA adopted the “Rules and Regulations of Quarter Racing” as published in the *1949 Year Book and Register of Merit*, prepared by Secretary Van Smelker.

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1953-1964 (The Era of Rillito Racetrack Inc.)

The history of the Rillito Race Track has always been colorful. If the 1940s marked the initial, flourishing era of clean racing and good sportsmanship for Quarter Horse racing, the tone changed dramatically in the early 1950s and, for a brief period, the racetrack got into the hands of people of questionable repute.

The Arizona Racing Commission had been pressuring Rukin Jelks to improve his site, a task he preferred not to undertake, so he decided to sell Rillito. When Tucson-based Detroit mobster and racehorse owner Peter Licavoli expressed an interest in buying the facility, Jelks exclaimed "Why Pete if I sold you this track, they'd run me out of town." (Wooddancer 1981.) In the 1950s, especially in resort towns across the country, organized crime was seriously infiltrating legitimate businesses like horse racing. Backed by Licavoli and company, imposters incorporated under the name Rillito Race Track Inc. On July 7, 1953, the sale of lots 21-31 (where the racetrack is located) from J. Rukin Jelks to Rillito Race Track Inc. was recorded (PCR 1953).

On November 11, 1953, Rillito Race Track Inc. obtained \$500,000 from Arizona Title and Trust for improvements (PCR 1953). No doubt Licavoli had set up the trust. The Grandstand, Clubhouse and other early site features were built between the mortgage date November 11, 1953, and February 17, 1954, the date of an aerial photograph showing said features (Photo 15). At the improved facility, Rillito's new owners intended to push Thoroughbred, not Quarter Horse racing (Cowgill 1975).

Apparently serious concern about Rillito's ownership soon surfaced. On March 19, 1954, a report written by County Attorney Morris K Udall, recommended to the Arizona Racing Commission that Rillito's racing permit not be renewed until questions about its ownership were resolved ("Commission..." 1954). The corporation took care to quickly divest itself of its criminal shareholders.

On November 21, 1954, Rillito Race Track Inc. opened its season under new ownership (Wooddancer 1981). Apparently, more than 116,000 townspeople and tourists took part during the 1954-1955 season. In response to this show of increased interest, Rillito officials promised to attract better horses for better racing by re-instituting Quarter Horse along with Thoroughbred racing. ("Rillito Park..." 1955.)

In November of 1955, it was announced that Rillito Park would open to a banner season (Rillito Park..." 1955). There would be a total of forty-six racing days, including one for charity. Quarter Horses and Thoroughbreds would share attention in the regular ten-race offerings. A four-member advisory board including J. Rukin Jelks had been appointed to help direct growth. ("Advisory Board..." 1955.) Well-qualified officials were hired to serve during the season, some of whom divided their time between the Rillito and summer duty elsewhere. (Officials..." 1955.)

Along with the existing Track, Rillito's recently-built facilities included a well-appointed Turf Club and a Grandstand capable of seating 3,000 people. The latest in equipment "for the protection of the racing fan" included an electrical starting gate that "assures every horse an equal chance." Photo finish cameras took the guesswork out of close races. Wagering was protected by the American Totalizator Company's "intricate selling and calculating machinery" which made possible a series of accurate odds postings on the infield tote boards and locked off betting the instant each race started. ("Rillito Has..." 1955.)

Rillito Park was run by Rillito Race Track Inc. until the early 1960s when, due to a tax default, Pima County Sheriff's Department had to take over the property. On February 19, 1965, a recorded Sheriff's Deed conveyed the property to Emprise Corporation, a New York Corporation (PCR 1965).

Apparently Rillito did not operate from 1964 to 1968. Closing of the racetrack for four years, from 1964 to 1968 slowed down interest in the racing there. Racing started again in 1968, but success came in spurts between closures. While Rillito became a less-prestigious Thoroughbred/Quarter Horse venue, upscale facilities like Los Alamitos in California and Ruidoso Downs in New Mexico became the nation's leading Quarter Horse racetracks.

Recent History

In 1971 the Emprise Corporation gifted the Rillito Race Track to Pima County (Jennings 1974). Over the years the County leased Rillito to various operators on condition that the latter maintain and improve the facility. Subsequently the racetrack

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experienced a checkered commercial history but came into its own as a County Fair racing venue. (The Arizona Department of Racing administers funding for a limited number of County Fair racing days for tracks throughout the state). As such, Rillito continues to race Quarter Horses and Thoroughbreds while experiencing considerable popular support from its *aficionados*. The racetrack has also survived largely due to the efforts of volunteers. Noteworthy events of the recent decades are as follows.

In 1982 the Pima County Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to rezone and sell Rillito. Close to the Tucson Mall and valuable for development purposes, the Board had received requests to buy the property. A citizens' group and the public-at-large then fought to save Rillito by passing a 1984 ballot initiative that required twenty-five years of County Fair races and designated the facility as the official Pima County Horse Racing Track. It also mandated that the property be leased and used for other community activities like soccer, rugby, etc.

Another contingency plan of 1982 was the effort to put the racetrack on the National Register by the Committee to Preserve Historic Rillito Race Track under Joanne H. Vinik, Madeline Moore, Susan B. Brown, Gail Powers and Sally C. Wegner. (Wooddancer 1981, Chamberlain 2006). In a process that lasted four years, Rillito's "Chute" was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1986 (see Section 7 Summary).

Improvements still in place today appeared just before the 1988-1989 season. The five-person Rillito Park Raceway Limited Partnership had acquired the operating and concession rights and spent over \$500,000 in renovations of the facility (Palacios 1992). The opening day card included five live races and seven Breeder's Cup races simulcast from Churchill Downs in Kentucky. Bettors could watch the Kentucky races on forty new color television monitors installed throughout the Grandstand and Clubhouse. (Rickard 1988.)

The partners widened the entrance road and provided chip-and-seal, striped parking for 1,600 vehicles. Improvements also included a new racing surface for the Track plus new inside/outside "safety" railing. The new color scheme for the Grandstand/Clubhouse and Barns was burgundy and gray. Clubhouse renovations included all new chairs, tables, carpeting and paint. (Cowgill 1988.)

By 1992 the site became a multi-use, public park administered by Pima County's Parks and Recreation department. Athletic fields were built in the northwest corner of the parcel. Rillito Race Track held County Fair racing meets during the winter season and shared its site with soccer and other uses throughout the year (Bustamante 1992). Today under racetrack General Manager Patricia White, the Pima Horseman's Association has an operating contract from the Pima County Fair Horse Racing Commission for the annual winter race meet. SP Enterprises operates the concessions (White 2008).

In 2006 Pima County acquired the Jelks House/Stables property. The house serves as a rental today.

Unfortunately, Rillito Race Track faces an uncertain future. An influential community group hopes to end horse racing and turn the entire site into a soccer complex. If this happens, an important and irreplaceable Tucson historic landmark will be lost. In recent years, Rillito Race Track has proven that "it's small but it's also mighty, luring crowds of spectators that are the envy of much larger, much more extravagant facilities" (Ciarloni 2008). The racetrack fills to capacity on the closing day of each season. With ever-increasing restrictions, like a reduced number of racing days, an insufficient number of horse stalls and the demolition of several historic barns, the facility still attracts record numbers of people.

Developmental history/additional historic context information (if appropriate)

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9. Major Bibliographical References

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