

Derby Downs a special place



By Julianne Endres

Watertown Area Community Foundation

The Star-Spangled Banner takes place before a 4-H rodeo at Derby Downs in Watertown in this 2016 photo taken by Kathy Monnens.

There's something special about getting a little dirt on those boots at a rodeo in South Dakota.

That's certainly true at Derby Downs located at the junction of 32 St. W and Golf Course Road near Lake Kampeska, which has been hosting rodeos since the 1970s.

Kathy Monnens, secretary for the Eastern Dakota 4-H Regional Rodeo and member of the state's 4-H Board, attended the 4-H rodeo a couple weeks at Derby Downs. Obviously it wasn't her first as she used to show horses there as a young girl.

"The arena was not great back then," Monnens recalled, "but it was always a fun time."

Since then, the 4-H club helped get a lunch stand and office built underneath the crow's nest where the announcers and timers sat.

"I remember having a stove pipe running down from there," Monnens said. "We would attach a clothespin to the rope and get the results to the secretary that way."

As for the arena, "It has made tremendous strides and improvements since then," Monnens said.

Monnens credits the community, the Foundation and support from the core groups that use the arena for those improvements.



"We pushed really hard to make them happen," she said. "The added dollars from the Community Foundation were extremely welcome."

Roger Adams, the former Watertown Parks & Recreation and Forestry Department director from 1979 until 2011 said the many projects completed during his tenure wouldn't have been possible without the support of the Community Foundation.

Eventually, he said, it was Derby Downs' turn for improvements.

"There's a long list of (projects) with similar beginnings," Adams said. "A small group of hard working parents dedicated to get something done makes it happen. Derby Downs was no different."

Foundation support to Derby Downs over the years has helped with arena upgrades, including fencing, chutes, arena flooring, lighting, bathrooms and the crow's nest. The Lake Area Technical welding program constructed the new crow's nest to compliment the new arena when it was built.

Monnens said there are discussions in the works about redoing the clubhouse so it has better accessibility for concessions and is more accommodating for elderly people who need to use the restrooms and showers.

"There's always room for improvement," she said.

Editor's Note:

40 Years ... 40 Stories: This year the Watertown Area Community Foundation celebrates 40 years of "Looking Forward and Giving Back." by contributing 40 stories that will run each Saturday in the Public Opinion.

Derby Downs does now boast three arenas, including one for warming up. That, Monnens said, makes such a big difference for the hundreds of horse enthusiasts who use Derby Downs. Both the regional high school and 4-H rodeos are held there, as well as several barrel racing, horse shows, team roping and other sporting events.

This season began with a tack swap in April. The Saddle Horse Club comes out monthly during the summer and the National Little Britches Association is slated to be there in September.

"The arena is so great now, and we are so thankful," Monnens said. "Now, all we do is make sure the gates are swinging, the ground is good and everything else is working ... and go rodeo."

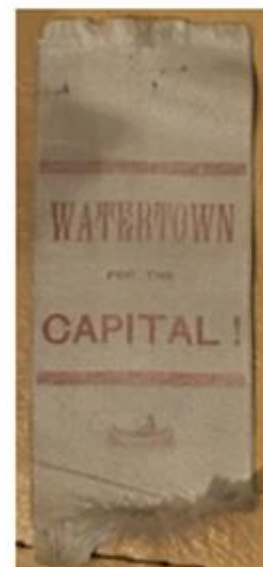
Derby Downs Details

Derby Downs has quite an interesting history.

Did you know:

- In 1889, Gov. Arthur Mellette and others campaigned for Watertown to be chosen as the state capital. Plans were designed to have a complex of government buildings at the Derby Downs site. There were even plans to construct the railroad to go to Derby Downs if Watertown was chosen.
- Derby Downs got its name because it originally was the home of soapbox derby races which were held there from 1955 to 1972. The peak number of the participants in the derby was just over 100 in the annual race which was coordinated through the Cosmopolitan Club with assistance of others.
- The concessions/restroom/meeting room building is the former clubhouse at the Watertown Municipal Golfcourse. That clubhouse has been the venue for many meetings, reunions and weddings.
- Years ago, Derby Downs was popular in the winter, too. The hill there was used for sledding and there was a tow rope which brought the sleds back up the hill.
- Due to its proximity, airport personnel used to do the mowing/maintaining of Derby Downs in the early years. During former Mayor Brenda Barger's term, the job transferred to the City Park & Recreation Department.
- The horse shows, rodeos and such began in the seventies. Former Mayor Herb Jenson (deceased) was instrumental in getting the first Pro Bowl rodeo here.

(Thank you Christy Lickei, Codington County Heritage Museum; Prudy Calvin, Mellette Memorial Association; Roger Adams, former Park & Rec Dept. director; for providing these facts.)



Prudy Calvin (Mellette Memorial Association)