

Arlington Downs

“Big-Time Horse Racing in a Small-Town”

TSHA—2026 Annual Meeting

“We Are Off to the Races! Horse Racing History in Texas”

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ARLINGTON DOWNS



**Thundering hooves.
Cheering spectators.
Thrilling races.
Outstanding facilities.
Welcome to Arlington Downs.**

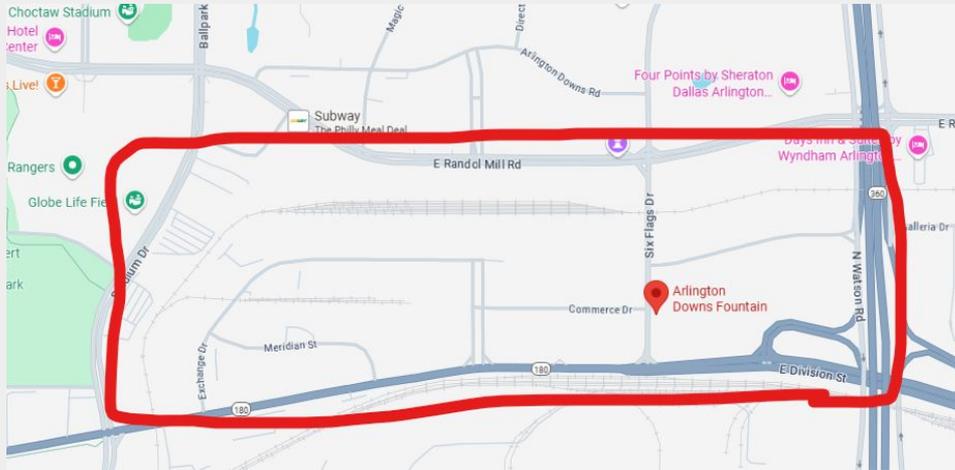
Arlington Downs - Overview



- Outstanding facilities
- Horse racing from 1929-1937
- Legalized gambling starting in 1933 || 1929-1933, 1933-1937
- Track had a second life with auto racing, fairs, rodeos, and events until late 1950s
- Paved the way Arlington's tourism (Six Flags and Entertainment District)

Part of the Arlington Downs exhibit at Fielder Museum

Arlington Downs - Location



- About 20 miles south of here in Arlington
- General boundaries -
 - North: Randol Mill Road
 - East: Highway 360
 - South: Division Street (historic Bankhead Highway)
 - West: Stadium Drive (near AT&T Stadium)

The Small Town: Arlington in 1929



- Population 4,000 by 1930
- Cotton gins, farmland
- Early draws - Mineral Well, North Texas Agricultural College (NTAC, now UTA), & Top O' Hill Terrace
- Interurban - electric trolley
- U.S. 80 / Bankhead Highway

The Tycoon: W.T. Waggoner (1852-1934)



- **Wealthy, influential, visionary who helped shaped the economic landscape of North Texas**
- **Oil and cattle tycoon; rancher, horse breeder**
- **3,000-acre Waggoner Three D farm near Arlington with iconic DDD brand (reverse Ds), a symbol of quality in cattle and thoroughbreds**
- **Also owned the massive 500,000+ acre Waggoner Ranch near Vernon (175 miles NW of Arlington)**

The Dream: Constructing Arlington Downs



- **\$2-\$3 million (nearly \$50 million today)**
- **1 mile oval track**
- **6,000-seat grandstand (all of Arlington's population could fit inside; later expanded to fit up to 25,000)**
- **Landscaped grounds and attractive amenities**
- **Provided jobs during Great Depression**
- **First major venue in Arlington**

Photos



The Grand Opening & Early Years (1929–1933)

races



OPENING
the magnificent new track
Arlington
Downs
at ARLINGTON, TEXAS
with America's greatest thoroughbreds
NOV. 6th to 16th
SIX RACES DAILY
Purses totaling **\$75,000**

- First race: November 6, 1929
- Over 10,000 spectators on Opening Day - wealthy, influential, famous, elected officials, families, from near & far
- Excitement, entertainment, & escapism; luxury and comfort when times were tough
- Waggoner lost money during this time to prove its appeal

The Social Scene: Families, Fedoras, and Furs



- More family-friendly than baseball or boxing - relatively inexpensive, an affordable luxury
- Wealthier guests enjoyed private clubhouses, fine-dining
- Equalizer; everyone watched the same races - melting pot of cultures & classes; Sport of Kings
- More of a communal park than a sports venue, with gardens, fountains, and open space

The Gamble (1933)

Betting Soon Is to Be Legal

*** *** *** ***

Here's How to Wager on Ponies

*** *** *** ***

You Must Be at the Tracks

**GOVERNOR SIGNS
NEW RACE BILL**

**RACING BILL
IS APPROVED
BY GOVERNOR**

Law, Designed to Bring
Horse Events Back, May
Be Effective About Sept. 1

Proposal Is 'Rider' Attached
to Department Fund Plan,
Signed in 24 Hours.

- 1933 - most important year in the track's history, legalized pari-mutuel betting for first time since 1903
- Waggoner's political influence and intense lobbying
- Profits for himself and other tracks; tax revenue for Texas, who also felt effects of Great Depression

The Boom & Golden Years (1933–1937)



- Legal gambling and the expansion to 25,000 seats
- Rivaling the Kentucky Derby and the best tracks in the country
- Attracted the best jockeys and horses; prestige
- Brought greater excitement & enthusiasm; fueled area growth and tourism

Photos



Photos



Photos

RACES ---

1934 FALL MEETING

ARLINGTON DOWNS

OVER \$100,000 IN PURSES

October 25—November 12, Inclusive

DAILY—EXCEPT SUNDAY



Races Daily
START 3 P. M.
RAIN OR SHINE

WAGGONER HANDICAP
November 10, 1934
\$10,000 Added

ADMISSION
Including Grand Stand
and Federal Tax
\$1.00
FREE PARKING

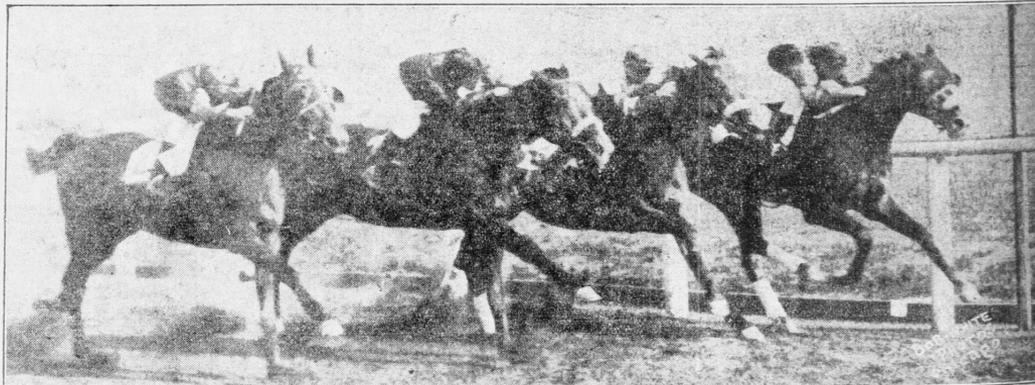
MEMBERSHIPS NOW SELLING

Photos



Photos

HORSE RACES AT ARLINGTON DOWNS



BIG 10-DAY RACE MEET

NOVEMBER 6-16, 1929

ARLINGTON, TEXAS

6 RACES DAILY 6

Rain or Shine

No Purse Less Than \$1,000. Handicaps \$1,200 and \$1,500.

General Admission \$1.50.

Club House Admission—Ladies \$2.50, Gentlemen \$5.50

YOU'LL MISS IT—IF YOU MISS IT

Texas Jockey Club

The Laws of Texas against Betting and
Bookmaking will be strictly enforced

Texas Jockey Club

The End of an Era

1934

W. T. WAGGONER SUCCUMBS TO SECOND STROKE

'Three D Lost Real Boss,' Will Rogers Says of Waggoner

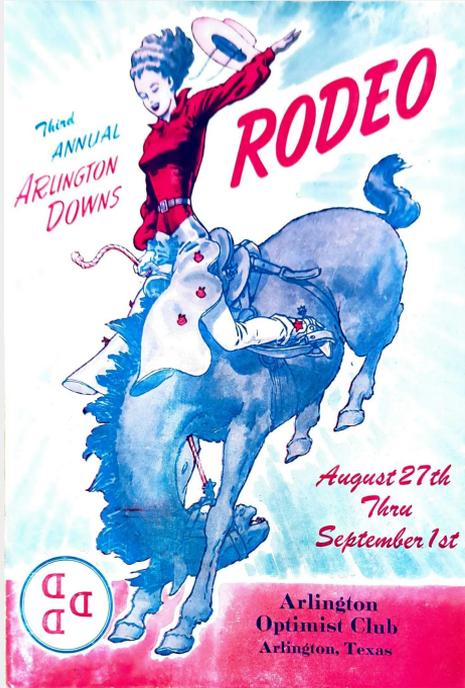
HOLLYWOOD, Cal., Dec. 13.— A fine old friend, and one of the last of the great cowmen, died in Fort Worth, Texas, W. T. Waggoner. His was one of the two biggest ranches in the U. S. It had oil all over it, and it made him sore every time they found a new well, for he said it was always on the best grass land, and just spoiled it for that many cattle. He would rather lose a dollar on a cow than make a thousand on an oil well. He loved good horses, and had the best in Texas. There will never be any class of people in our country that can replace the old Western cowman, for common sense, shrewdness, humor and fine citizenship. The Three D lost a real boss. Yours,
WILL ROGERS.

Governor Asks Repeal of Horse Race Betting Law

1937

- 1933 - Legalized gambling
- 1934 - Waggoner's death
- 1937 - Repeal of legalized gambling;
 - Pressure from religious leaders, changing opinions of gambling, lingering effects of Great Depression - 'robbing the poor,' false hopes
 - Arlington Downs closed - 1937
 - Tracks were far less profitable
 - Texas horse racing wouldn't be the same for decades

The Second Act



- Operated by Waggoner's family - still bills to pay
- Became an event center - cattle auctions, rodeos, livestock shows, fairs, and a different kind of horsepower with auto racing; buildings were also leased for storage
- World War II - cultural shift; jobs, rations, restrictions

The Birth of Modern-Day Arlington



Did you know? Land from Arlington Downs was sold to developers for the GSWID, who created Six Flags as a revenue source. The amusement park, celebrating it's 65th anniversary this year, was going to be temporary but proved to be a major draw.

- 1953 - outer bldgs demolished
- 1958 - grandstands demolished; land sold to developers for the Great Southwest Industrial District, which helped fuel Arlington's mid-century growth
- 1961 - Six Flags Over Texas

Horse racing track proved Arlington could support large, stadium-sized entertainment venues - part of our identity today

Arlington Downs remembered...

There's always a longshot in horse racing, that one horse who doesn't stand much of a chance of winning. But sometimes, that horse comes from behind and emerges as a contender. Maybe they don't win, yet they surprise everyone. They make a mark. They surprise the doubters. That's Arlington—the American Dream City—and the spirit of Arlington Downs still pumps through our veins, even 95 years since that first race.

And some say, if you listen closely on a quiet night along Division Street, you can still hear the thundering hooves of our past.

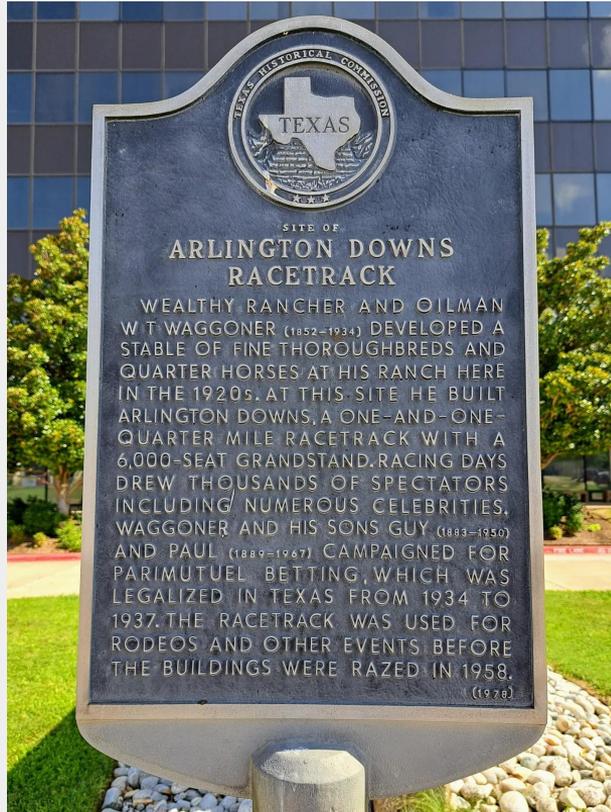
— Jason S. Sullivan, 11-30-24

The Legacy



- Historical Markers
- Water trough
- Murals
- Street name
- Office building
- Fielder Museum

The Legacy (photos)



Left -
Texas Historical
Marker (1978)



Right -
City of Arlington
Local Landmark
plaque (2016)

The Legacy (photos)



Watering trough -
the only artifact
remaining at the site
(near 360 & Division
Street)

The Legacy (photos)



Arlington Downs Road

The Legacy (photos)



Part of a larger mural in
Downtown
Arlington
celebrating our
history

Mural by Lee
and Sheri Hay

The Legacy (photos)



Part of the Arlington Downs exhibit at Fielder Museum

More Info

Fielder Museum (1616. W. Abram Street, Arlington)
—exhibit featuring photos and artifacts

UTA Special Collections & Digital Library
—photos, artifacts

Tarrant County Archives
—photos, artifacts

My blog
—JasonSSullivan.com (more info coming soon!)

Photo Credits

Slide 2 - Publicity photo for Arlington Downs, 1933

(Photo Credit: UTA Libraries and Fort Worth Star-Telegram)

Slide 3 - Arlington Downs exhibit at Fielder Museum

(Photo Credit: Jason S. Sullivan)

Slide 4 - Arlington map

Photo Credit: Google Maps

Slide 5 - The Small Town: Arlington in 1929

(Photo Credit: J. W. Dunlop Photo Collection & UTA Special Collections)

Slide 6 - The Tycoon: W.T. Waggoner

(Photo Credit: Fort Worth Star-Telegram Collection & UTA Libraries Digital Gallery)

Slide 7 - The Dream: Constructing Arlington Downs

(Photo Credit: Fort Worth Star-Telegram Collection & UTA Libraries Digital Gallery)

Slide 8 - Arlington Downs Entrance

(Photo Credit: Jack White Photograph Collection & UTA Libraries Digital Gallery)

Slide 8 - Arlington Downs exhibit at Fielder Museum

(Photo Credit: Jason S. Sullivan)

Photo Credits

Slide 9 - Newspaper ad for Arlington Downs

(Photo Credit: Fort Worth Star-Telegram -
September 29, 1929)

Slide 10 - Crowds at the track

(Photo Credit: Fort Worth Star-Telegram Collection &
UTA Libraries Digital Gallery)

Slide 11 - “Betting is Soon To Be Legal”

(Photo Credit: Fort Worth Star-Telegram -
June 18, 1933)

Slide 11 - “Racing Bill is Approved by Governor”

(Photo Credit: Fort Worth Star-Telegram -
May 25, 1933)

Slide 11 - “Governor Signs New Race Bill”

(Photo Credit: Fort Worth Star-Telegram -
October 13, 1933)

Slide 12 - Arlington Downs

(Photo Credit: Tarrant County Archives)

Slide 13 - Horses breaking from the gate

(Photo Credit: Fort Worth Star-Telegram Collection &
UTA Libraries Digital Gallery)

Slide 14 - Arlington Downs Texas Derby

(Photo Credit: Fort Worth Star-Telegram Collection &
UTA Libraries Digital Gallery)

Photo Credits

Slide 14- Arlington Downs Texas Derby

(Photo Credit: Fort Worth Star-Telegram Collection & UTA Libraries Digital Gallery)

Slide 15 - 1934 Fall Meeting at Arlington Downs

(Photo Credit: Tarrant County Archives)

Slide 16 - Fall 1935 admission ticket to the Texas Jockey Club, Inc. (Photo Credit: Tarrant County Archives)

Slide 17 - Newspaper ad

(Photo Credit: Fort Worth Star-Telegram - October 27, 1929)

Slide 18 - Gov. Asks Repeal of Horse Betting Law

(Photo Credit: Denton Record-Chronicle - January 04, 1937)

Slide 18 - W.T. Waggoner Succumbs to 2nd Stroke

(Photo Credit: Fort Worth Star-Telegram - December 12, 1934)

Slide 18 - 'Three D Lost Real Boss'

(Photo Credit: Fort Worth Star-Telegram - December 13, 1934)

Slide 19 - 'Third Annual Arlington Downs Rodeo

(Photo Credit: Tarrant County Archives)

Slide 19 - Official program for a stock car race at Arlington Downs Speedway (Photo Credit: Fielder Museum)

Resources

**Caddos, Cotton and Cowboys: Essays on Arlington -
by O.K. Carter**

**The History of Arlington Downs: A Texas Horse
Racing Legacy - by Donald Frazier, Ph.D.**

www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/arlington-downs-racetrack

**Arlington Downs: Horse Racing and Excitement in
Small-Town Arlington - by Jason S. Sullivan**

www.jasonssullivan.com/2024/11/30/arlington-downs-horse-racing-and-excitement-in-small-town-arlington/

UTA Library Digital Gallery

www.library.uta.edu/digitalgallery/