

Noteworthy Facility Modifications in the last 5-10 years

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City of Fort Worth, Will Rogers Memorial Center

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From the very beginning, modifications, additions, and renovations have had a major impact on the facility and the business at the Will Rogers Memorial Center. (WRMC) It is very hard to talk about the evolution of the facility without first talking about the history of the complex. To better understand the impact of noteworthy modifications and upgrades, you have to go back to the beginning.

### **History of the Will Rogers Memorial Center**

The groundwork for the Will Rogers Memorial Center was laid in November of 1923 when Texas started planning an event to celebrate 100 years of independence from Mexico.

There was a competition held in 1934 to determine the main hub for the Statewide celebration. Fort Worth decided not to enter the competition because it did not believe a northern location would be selected. Much to everyone's surprise, Dallas was selected

Local Fort Worth business leader Amon G. Carter decided to use this as an opportunity to promote Fort Worth. He formatted a plan to attract visitors away from the central exposition in Dallas and lure them to Fort Worth for his celebration. The plan in Dallas was to create an educational event for visitors to learn about Texas. Mr. Carter's event went the opposite direction and planned an event with a variety of shows, buildings and characters straight out of the West. Fort Worth wanted to entertain its guests.

The Fort Worth event would be called the Frontier Celebration. During the planning for the Frontier Celebration, there were discussions taking place in the community on the need to provide a new home for the Southwestern Exposition and Fat Stock Show, later known as the Fort Worth Stock Show and Rodeo. (FWSSR) With this in mind, the unofficial celebration proposal included the structures now known as the Will Rogers Coliseum, Pioneer Tower and

Auditorium. Knowing a project of this size could not be built during the Depression without financial help, Mr. Carter targeted Public Works Administration (PWA) funds. Very quickly, PWA project No. Tex 1342 R became a reality, and construction of the Will Rogers Memorial Center was underway.

The official dedication of the new buildings took place on December 23, 1936. The final inspection occurred on January 20, 1937. From the time the contract was signed with the excavation contractor, the total time to the final inspection was 340 days. The total construction cost was \$1,580,042.73. Subtracting funds from the celebration and the PWA grant funds, the cost to the City of Fort Worth was \$604,315.73.

From the very beginning of this project, in the back of his mind, Carter also hoped the Coliseum would become the home of the Southwestern Exposition and Fat Stock Show.

### **Southwestern Exposition and Fat Stock Show**

Ultimately, Amon Carter got his wish. The Southwestern Exposition and Fat Stock Show moved to the Will Rogers Memorial Center in 1944. With the move from the Stockyards in North Fort Worth, the Will Rogers Coliseum became the permanent home of the world's first indoor rodeo. With the addition of the Cattle barns in 1948, the foundation was laid for the complex that exists today.

### **Becoming a Well-Known Equestrian and Livestock Facility**

Over the years, the Will Rogers Memorial Center became a large community gathering place. The complex played host to numerous events from concerts, Golden Gloves Boxing, the Fort Worth Symphony, the Circus, and of course the Fort Worth Stock Show and Rodeo. Will

Rogers became a very popular venue for all of the major entertainers including the Rolling Stones and Jimi Hendrix.

As time went by, the equestrian and livestock business started showing interest. By the 1980's, the Stock Show was growing and the equestrian business had a presence in the Will Rogers Complex. In the late 1980's a major renovation of the old wooden horse barns and the addition of the John Justin Arena was a game changer for the future of the complex. These new state-of-the-art facilities, referred to as the Equestrian Center, would be the catalyst that would put Will Rogers Memorial Center on the map as one of the premier equestrian facilities in the country. This was followed by the addition of W.R. "Bob" Watt Arena and the Moncrief Building in 1996.

With three climate-controlled show arenas and the ability to set up over 1500 horse stalls, the facility attracted large horse shows such as the American Paint Horse Association World Show (APHA), the Appaloosa Horse Club World Show (ApHC), the American Miniature Horse Association World Show (AMHA) and the National Cutting Horse Association (NCHA) Triple Crown. Eventually, the American Quarter Horse Youth Association World Show (AQHyA) joined the list of major horse shows held at the Will Rogers Memorial Center. WRMC had become a major horse show facility.

### **Major Loss**

All appeared to be going well until about 2003. Many of the buildings built in the 80's were now twenty years old. The major systems in those buildings were also getting old and were starting to show their age. Other issues started to create problems as well. The arena footing had reached the end of its useful life and large shows were starting to have operational issues.

These issues came to a head in 2007 when the AQHA announced their Youth World Show would be moving to Oklahoma City for the 2008 show. The AQHA show management stated the lack of covered riding space and inadequate footing as factors in their decision. However, the main reason from the show management was, “You have built a facility for a stock show and rodeo that you expect horse shows to adapt to. There are other facilities that were built for horse shows that will work better.”

### **What Next**

The loss of the AQHA Youth World show forced the City of Fort Worth and WRMC management to look at the entire operation. The facility was behind other large facilities in terms of features and infrastructure. Will Rogers did not have the knowledge and had not kept up with the equestrian industry and technology. They had simply gotten too comfortable and took their clients and shows for granted. To be successful, a new plan and a new philosophy had to be created that would guide the facility moving forward.

### **The Plan**

Even though the WRMC was a large complex with a community center component, it was very obvious the largest piece and main focus of the business was going to be equestrian-based. To regain its status, the facility had to address several points in a very strategic order.

Priority one, WRMC had to address what were now aging facilities. The building systems were getting old and needed to be replaced. Other than the show arenas and the small warm-up areas attached to each show arena, there were no areas for exhibitors to ride on the

grounds. Temporary outdoor pens with no shade, had to be installed, making it look like the WRMC was not able to meet the needs of the shows who needed a facility the size of WRMC.

The footing in the show arenas had not been maintained since the arenas were built. The philosophy was, the facility did not need footing, the shows did. WRMC provided the “dirt” in each arena and left the details up to the shows. If a show needed a specific type of footing or implement, they would have to bring it in at their expense. Ironically, it was the AQHA who told WRMC “Your dirt is dead. It will not hold up for a horse show.”

The science of footing was going crazy in the late 1990s and early 2000s. There were a wide variety of tractor implements on the market, and WRMC had none of them. A box blade, a rotary tiller and a homemade harrow were all the facility had available.

At that time, footing experts were popping up all over the country. In the southern states, Bob Kiser started making his name known with equestrian associations and show facilities, and WRMC was no exception. WRMC needed to catch up to the industry trends and learn the importance and the science of footing. It was apparent that quality footing was going to be essential if WRMC was going to become an industry leader.

Like most facilities, WRMC was trying to fill every available weekend. There were 5 or 6 shows that lasted seven days to two weeks, but the weekend and small shows monopolized the calendar. However, there was no significant money to be made off the smaller shows.

To make things more difficult, at that time, the clients also controlled the business. If a client had a show on a particular date, that date was theirs for as long as they wanted it. This made it impossible to bring in new shows, so, there was no change in site. WRMC had to learn the difference between booking events and scheduling events.

Technology was starting to become a big deal in the horse show business. Almost every show had a videographer and show management wanted to be able to broadcast the show feed around the property. Officials with the larger events started using computers and electronics in the scoring process. Show managers wanted entire computer networks set up to manage the entries, exhibitors and stalls for their competitions. WRMC could not do any of that. The larger shows were having to bring in, set up and pay for their own networks to operate their shows.

Adding to the problem was the fact that technology was growing and changing at a very fast pace. If WRMC were to install a technology system, it would have to be compatible with the operating system each association was using. If that could have been accomplished, the equipment would certainly have become obsolete within a couple of years.

One of the biggest problems to solve was how could WRMC change the facility in a way that would allow shows to grow. The Will Rogers Complex was completely landlocked. There was nowhere to spread out or build more buildings. How can shows grow with no additional available space?

The key to all of the needed changes was funding. How were WRMC and the City of Fort Worth going to pay for all of the needed changes and additions? As a general fund department with the City of Fort Worth, Will Rogers had to compete with all of the other City departments for funding. It was very hard to take money needed for streets repairs, Police and Fire Departments away from the citizens of Fort Worth to replace the dirt in an equestrian arena. That was a losing battle every time. Nevertheless, all of these issues were real.

If WRMC was going to be a viable event facility and economic generator for the City, it had to bring in people and their money from outside the State of Texas, Tarrant County and the City of Fort Worth. Not only did the facility have to generate sales tax revenue, it needed to help



make the local economy grow. By definition, this would require new money and spending from outside the local area. The Mayor and City Council, at the time, recognized this fact and were supportive of the efforts to make major changes to the facility.

### **Plan Implementation**

The first major move was taken by the City of Fort Worth. City leaders understood the Public Events Department generated tourism. The Public Events Department operates the Fort Worth Convention Center and the Will Rogers Memorial Center. By generating tourism, outside money was brought into the City and spent in hotels, restaurants and stores. This “outside” money would not only generate sales tax revenue, it would insert “new” money into the economy and would help the local economy grow. City leaders realized this was a major benefit of tourism and took steps to give the Public Events Department and the Will Rogers Memorial Center the best opportunity to be successful and grow their business while stimulating the local economy.

The City of Fort Worth removed the Public Events Department from the general fund and made it a special revenue fund. This meant the department would be supported by the business and tourism dollars it generated, not local sales tax revenue. It would no longer have to compete with other City departments for funding. Along with that change, the department had exclusive access to hotel occupancy taxes and the City of Fort Worth’s portion of the revenue sharing from the DFW Airport. The funding shift from the general fund to a special revenue fund meant WRMC would have more flexibility and would allow it to benefit from its successes. WRMC would also look to maximize the opportunity for public/private partnerships. This is something that had been done before and was very successful.

**Let the Progress Begin**

Almost immediately, maintenance and replacement of building systems started to occur. The first big improvement that occurred was the complete replacement of the footing in the equestrian show arenas. At a cost of approximately \$100K, this had an immediate impact and showed the clients that the quality of their shows and the safety of their participants, both animals and people, would be at the forefront of the WRMC improvements. This was immediately followed by the purchase of appropriate arena implements so the facility team could maintain the footing and get the maximum benefit from the investment. Over the next several years, management and staff attended the League of Agriculture and Equestrian Center's Footing Academies. This further solidified the knowledge and commitment to equestrian footing. To date, WRMC has sent ten employees to League Footing Academies, with key staff having attended multiple times.

It is important to understand, there was one key concept that would guide all future improvements. In the past, facilities were built that would serve only one type of activity, show or task. These facilities took up a great deal of space and were not very useful most of the year. The cattle pens, West Sale Arena, and the Sheep & Swine Barns are a few examples. This created operational issues as the business grew. WRMC quickly realized, moving forward, that every new facility had to be multi-purpose. This would be another major shift in philosophy for WRMC.

There were major other additions and improvements in the works. Between 2010 and 2013, several major changes and improvements would break ground.

The lower level of the John Justin Garage would be completely renovated. The floor of the garage would be dug down between 3-5 feet to allow for stalls, airflow and the ability to ride

horseback. Water and electricity would be added to allow exhibitors the ability to properly care for their animals. Keeping with the newly adopted concept of multi-purpose, the stalls in this barn would all be portable, allowing the garage to still be utilized for parking if there was a need.

The surface lot to the south of the John Justin Garage was removed. A two-story structure was built that would allow for two covered riding arenas on the top floor and additional stalls on the lower level. On its completion, it would take on the title of the new guiding principle and would be known as the Multi-Purpose Building.

A ramp, coated with Equi-Turf, was positioned between the Justin garage and the new structure allowing easy access for animals from the stalls below to the riding arenas and street level. These two buildings added much-needed riding space and increased the facility's stall capacity by over 40% with the addition of 700 new stalls. Like the garage, this structure also can be used as a two-level parking garage.

At the same time, a cover was built over Watt Dr, the street immediately behind the exhibitor entrance to the John Justin Arena. Since the building was built, Watt Dr. was used as a staging area for exhibitors showing in Justin Arena. This uncovered staging area left the exhibitors at the mercy of Mother Nature. The combination of heavy, thick show clothes and the Texas summer heat made this uncomfortable at the very least, but potentially, a dangerous situation. A cover over the street, that spanned the street and the full width of the building, connected the Richardson Bass Building with the John Justin Parking Garage. The addition of lighting and fans made this area a more comfortable and safe space for shows.

As soon as the Watt Dr. cover was completed, work started on the tunnel system. The tunnel system would connect all three show arenas, cattle pens and the Multi-Purpose Building

stalls via tunnels. Before this addition, moving cattle between arenas and pens had to be done by truck which was very expensive. The tunnels also made it possible for horse show exhibitors to move between buildings without having to go outside.

With the facility located in tornado alley, the tunnels also provided a safe location for exhibitors, staff and guests to seek refuge in the event of an emergency weather situation.

With momentum working in WRMC's favor, the Pavilion was added. This large covered riding arena provides an arena footprint equal to the size of the Will Rogers Coliseum arena. This facility came with show power, fans, internet and video capabilities, show lighting and a show-quality sound system. Utilizing panels, this arena can be configured for any activity the indoor arenas can be used for, including concerts. Like the previous additions, the footing and panels can be removed and the space can be used for covered trailer parking or day hauler parking.

The next target for renovation would be the Cattle Barns. These barns house a large portion of the WRMC stall capacity. Built in the late 1940s, the Cattle Barns were built to house cattle. They lacked the functionality and flexibility needed for equestrian shows.

This renovation would be the beginning of a multi-phased project, in partnership with the Fort Worth Stock Show and Rodeo. This public/private partnership had been very successful in the past and played a major role in the original construction of the John Justin Garage and the Moncrief Building/Watt Arena. In each case, the FWSSR would contribute half the cost of construction.

Cattle Barn 2 would be the first phase of the renovations. The financial arrangement would be the same as it had been in the past. The FWSSR paid half and the WRMC paid the other half.

With this financial arrangement in place, both parties were extremely involved in the design phase. Once again, the multi-purpose philosophy remained the guiding principle for this project. This phase would completely renovate the barn while maintaining the history of the 1940's front façade. Power for the barn and exhibitors was increased, and new portable cattle ties and horse stalls were all included as part of the project.

With the design of Dickies Arena nearing completion and plans for construction underway, the Cattle Barn 2 project also took into consideration how to connect the grounds and the people from the Will Rogers complex with the new Dickies Arena property. This idea resulted in what came to be known as the Promenade. This would create a path for people and animals to access the area south of the cattle barns. New gates were added in the new decorative fence that would allow the two facilities to function as one large complex.

To construct the Promenade, the Milking Parlor, which sat between Cattle Barns 1 and 2, had to be relocated. The new milking parlor was incorporated into the footprint of Cattle Barn 2. The new Milking Parlor was equipped with a full AV system, video monitors and retractable seating. This space can also be used as a classroom, office or meeting space. This project was completed in 11 months with the opening in January of 2016 and a price tag of approximately \$15M.

A couple of years later, phase 2 of the Cattle Barn project would begin. This project would almost be an exact mirror image duplication of the Cattle Barn 1 project. In the space where the Milking Parlor was in Cattle Barn 2, Cattle Barn 1 would have the Stockman's Café. In place of the Promenade that was attached to the Cattle Barn 2 project, this project would renovate the small animal barn. With the same guiding principles and financial agreement in

place, the Cattle Barn 1 project began in February of 2017. It was completed in 11 months and opened in January 2018. Again, the price tag was approximately \$15M.

In 2018, WRMC kicked off a \$2M technology project that would tie all of the facilities on the complex together via fiber optics. This would allow all of the audio and video signals on the complex to move into the digital world and away from the antiquated analog systems. This allowed for the installation of close to 100 monitors across the facility. A path was also created that would allow Dickies Arena and WRMC to share audio and video feeds when necessary.

Not exactly a part of the WRMC complex, the Dickies Arena would become a very close partner and opened in November of 2019. This arena project was also the result of a public/private partnership. The facility is owned by the City of Fort Worth and managed privately. This project had a cost of more than \$500M, with the public participation capped at \$225M.

With a multi-tiered financing plan put in place by the voters, the Public Events Department is responsible for the City's portion of the debt. Even after being closed just a few months after opening due to the pandemic, Dickies Arena has outperformed all expectations.

The progress will continue with phase 3 of the Cattle Barn renovations. The target of this phase is the Sheep and Swine Barns. Currently, these barns have permanent animal pens, making these buildings unusable for the majority of the year.

This project will be a little more ambitious than the previous phases of Cattle Barn renovations. This project will also introduce portable small animal pens and 300 new portable horse stalls. When the pens and stalls are removed, each barn will have a flat concrete floor, making these buildings useable for a variety of other events.

A climate-controlled show arena will be constructed between the two barns. This arena will be equipped with retractable seating, show power, video screens and a quality sound system. This facility will also have an animal loading dock and staging area available. With a concrete floor, this arena can be arranged in many different configurations. By removing the dirt, the space can be used for food functions, community events or even small concerts. Construction is expected to begin on February 5, 2024, and will open in January 2025. It will carry a price tag close to \$40M. Like the previous phases, the FWSSR will be responsible for half the cost of construction.

### **The Impact**

Since early 2000, WRMC has spent over \$100M in new construction/renovations, with another \$50M spent on smaller capital projects and improvements. WRMC has met all of the needs and goals of the plan created after the AQHA departure. All of the additions and improvements were guided by the multi-purpose concept. Every addition, improvement and renovation on the complex has many functions and uses to maximize usability.

WRMC has also created a sales environment that focuses on the right business, not just any business. WRMC only focuses on horse shows that are a minimum of two weeks long. In a large facility, smaller shows are simply more expensive. Consideration for booking smaller shows is given when shows can be moved to a place on the calendar where they can be ‘stacked.’ Hosting multiple shows at the same time spreads the costs of operation between shows making them more economical. WRMC has actually seen a decrease in the number of events over the past few years with a corresponding increase in revenue over the same period.

WRMC has now moved into the 21st century with technology. With the addition of fiber optics and digital equipment, reliability and revenue-generating opportunities have increased. WRMC contracted with an exclusive third-party vendor to manage the client-facing data telecom services. Internet access, telephone service, video/cable television and equipment rentals are some of the services offered that can now be delivered directly to your stall or your RV. This has proven to be a very successful revenue stream for the department.

The increase in stall capacities and the restructuring of the sales philosophy have allowed the shows to grow in both stall numbers and show days used. This shift has allowed WRMC to be flexible with the larger events which have all seen growth over the past few years.

## **Conclusion**

WRMC suffered a major loss, which ironically, became the catalyst for a “game-changing” journey of additions, improvements and renovations. In this industry, many facilities use the metric of the number of weekends occupied, while WRMC uses the number of days.

The WRMC calendar hosts between 200 and 250 events per year. To put the calendar into perspective, four of those events last 23 days or more. It is not uncommon to have 5-8 events occurring on the property at the same time. In a non-pandemic year, there are less than 5 days a year where there is not something going on at the WRMC. Since fiscal year 2016, WRMC has seen an increase in event revenue of over 70%.

The WRMC gates welcome to the grounds approximately 2.5 million visitors per year, contributing an economic impact on the local economy of more than \$200M per year.

Each of these statistics is a direct result of the planning and strategy that came out of the loss of the AQHA in the early 2000’s. The structure of the Public Events Department within the



City government, the unique funding opportunities and noteworthy facility modifications over the past five to ten years have allowed WRMC to operate at a level that most facilities can only dream of.

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