

# Side Streets: Racing back in time at the old Colorado Springs greyhound park

By [Bill Vogrin](#) Updated: February 24, 2014 at 7:46 am • Published: February 23, 2014 | 4:45 am • 12

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The rusting and rotting old Rocky Mountain Greyhound Park, 3701 N. Nevada Ave., as it looked on Feb. 19, 2014. The original grandstand to the left was built in six weeks in 1949 and opened to a sellout crowd estimated at 4,500 on July 21, 1949. The larger, rounded-roof grandstand to the right was built in 1971. Bill Vogrin / The Gazette.

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With its rusting roof, peeling paint, tattered window coverings and weed-choked track and infield, the shuttered Rocky Mountain Greyhound Park looks like it has been through a war.

I visited the 28-acre complex on North Nevada Avenue last week after receiving calls from readers. Some were worried about activities they'd observed; others were simply curious about the fate of the park.

I saw the west grandstand, erected in only six weeks in 1949 after Colorado voters legalized gambling on horse and dog racing the previous year. (Track staff used to build charcoal fires under it to keep gamblers warm on chilly nights. Later, a concrete apron was built with steel pipes inside so hot water could be pumped in to provide safer radiant heat.)

And I checked out the larger east grandstand, built in 1971, with its restaurants and clubs, paddock and kennels.

As I wandered, I had a hard time imagining this was the place where hundreds of thousands gathered each summer, gambling hundreds of millions of dollars over 50-plus years on greyhounds chasing Rocky, a mechanical rabbit.

Not only does the old park look like it has been through a war, it actually is a war zone these days.

On weekends, DMZ Airsoft hosts combat games inside the east grandstand.

For decades, folks in fur coats and suits paid 35 cents to enter, study racing forms, have a drink at Rocky's Roost and bet on the dogs.

Now, competitors 14 years and older pay \$15 to run around and blast each other with round, plastic pellets. Makeshift walls pockmarked by pellets create hiding places, along with old furniture strewn about inside the 135,000-square-foot space.

The rotting structure isn't all about kids' games, however.

On the north side of the complex, Ukrainian immigrant Rustam Filimonchuk rents office space for his Unlimited Express trucking company. He stages his nine trucks from the parking lot for long-haul and local jobs.

At the far west end is the canopy where Springs elite used to drive up for a white-tablecloth steak and lobster dinner at the Cloud 9 restaurant. Today, the space is occupied by Medibis, a medical marijuana dispensary. (In a way, I guess it's still Cloud 9!)

Of all the things I saw, perhaps the most depressing was the way some of the concrete-block kennels are being used today: as shelter by homeless people. In fact, it was a neighbor who said she sees homeless living in some of the 17 kennel buildings as she walks along the Templeton Gap waterway each day.

Sure enough, I drove the perimeter and saw doors busted open, windows smashed and screens ripped down. Beer bottles and cans were scattered where squatters had been hanging out.

Intrigued by the property, I called Richard Kelly, whose Trend Commercial Real Estate is marketing the land as a development site. He represents the owners, who paid \$1.5 million in 2009 for the park after it ended an eight-year run as Post Time, an off-track betting facility that offered live racing for a few seasons.

Kelly said he's hopeful to have a buyer soon for the property, which he described as the single largest building site within the city limits. He envisions it as a major redevelopment project that likely will involve removing the racing facility.

"With favorable zoning, it can be used for just about anything," Kelly said.

A bulldozer would be preferable to the rotting hulk that now exists, at least according to the Cloud family, which owned and operated the park from its inception until selling it in 2001.

"I feel really sad when I go by there because of the weeds and disrepair," said Don Cloud, 81, whose wife, Patricia, was the daughter of Jerry and Red Wagner, part of the original ownership group in 1949.

"I feel like they trashed the property," he added. "Probably the best way to go is to just tear it down."

It's painful for Cloud to see now because of what it meant to his family for so many years.

"All I think of is all the memories we have there for 50 years," he said wistfully, recalling how his in-laws became involved with the track almost by accident.

Gazette archives from 1949 tell of a race to open the track. Attorney Martin Murphy incorporated the Rocky Mountain Kennel Club, won a racing license from the state, secured the site then 2 miles north of Colorado Springs and ordered concrete poured and a prefabricated steel grandstand erected.

Jerry Wagner was president of Transit Mix Concrete Co. and won the contract for the track. When Murphy wasn't able to pay, Wagner took stock in the racing company, and he and Red joined the ownership group.

A year later, Wagner became president of the club and took over management. Don and Patricia were junior high sweethearts and worked at the track before they were married in 1954.

"We had five children, and every one of them worked at the dog track," Don Cloud said. "It really has been a family thing for a lot of years."

A sellout crowd estimated at 2,500 attended opening night July 21, 1949. But the first year was difficult as there were allegations of ticket fraud by management staff and a near foreclosure.

Soon, however, the business thrived.

By 1955, attendance was reported at a record 165,929 for the three-month season. The track reached \$6 million in wagers in 1961, and by 1988, the annual total wagered approached \$50 million.

Don Cloud recalled the track as a precise choreography of hundreds of staff - about 350 a night during the racing season - selling admission tickets, taking bets, operating the restaurants, snack bars and clubs, counting money, training and grooming dogs, recording results and getting the next day's programs printed overnight.

And, of course, he remembered the dogs fondly.

"During the season, we'd have 500 or 600 dogs there," he said. "We raced eight dogs per race with a dozen races a night. So we needed about 100 dogs a night. And they could only race every three days. That's a lot of dogs."

The family also diversified, opening a flea market in the spacious parking lot during offseason weekends beginning in 1968. By 1991, the flea market had grown so popular that the Cloud family bought 120 acres on East Platte Avenue near Powers Boulevard and relocated it.

After Cripple Creek's casinos opened in 1991 and crowds at the track began to fade, the family made another strategic move. In 1995, it spent \$9 million to open Red and Jerry's, a huge complex with off-track betting, a sports bar and other entertainment options in Sheridan, south of Denver.

The family sold the greyhound park in 2001, and live racing continued sporadically for a few years, ending in 2005. The track limped along as an off-track betting facility until it closed in 2008, and Kelly's group bought it a year later.

Meanwhile, the Cloud family's spin-off businesses thrive and are managed today by Karen Cloud and her brother, Randy Cloud. Both pay homage to the greyhound park: Red and Jerry's is named for their grandparents who started the business, and the flea market offices are filled with track memorabilia and photos.

I sifted through their scrapbooks and was amazed at the museum-worthy collection of photos, numbered racing blankets worn by the dogs, programs, even the printing plates.

Karen and Randy, like their father Don, are disappointed to see the old track deteriorate.

"It's disheartening when I think about what it once was and what has happened to it," Karen said.

But they are busy carrying on the other businesses and don't spend much time ruminating on it.

"It's in our past," Randy said. "We've moved on."

Rather than bemoan the current condition, they prefer to laugh at memories, such as the wiener dog races that attracted big crowds or the "mongrel marathons" that invited the public to bring their pets to run the oval.

And they smile at the thought of all the people who worked there and the thousands more who looked forward to evenings at the track.

"Our family was blessed to have the opportunity," Randy said as Karen nodded. "It was a great 50 years at the track."

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