

From the Mid City Messenger

<http://midcitymessenger.com/2014/11/18/fair-grounds-history-remembered-in-new-documentary/#more-8147>

Nov 18 2014



*Female patrons line up to go into the old Fair Grounds. Photo courtesy of Lou Hodges.*

When Ronnie Lamarque remembers his favorite moments at the New Orleans Fair Grounds, he can't help but break into song.

The Louisianian is now known for his auto business, Lamarque Ford, and for a boisterous personality that comes across in frequent television advertisements. In 1988, however, he was also the co-owner of the Louisiana thoroughbred Risen Star, a horse who put the Fair Grounds on the map when he won at the Preakness and Belmont Stakes.

In a new WYES documentary honoring the history of the Faubourg St. John Fair Grounds, Lamarque — who says he often performs upon request — breaks out into an altered version of “New York, New York” for the camera crew, as he recalls his beloved horse. During a recent viewing of the documentary, the rendition elicited laughter from hundreds who gathered to remember Risen Star and other elements of the race track's history.



*The Louisiana horse Risen Star (WYES).*

Lamarque is one of many Fair Grounds regulars, trainers, jockeys and journalists featured in the documentary, called "New Orleans Fair Grounds Memories." Produced by Peggy Scott Laborde, the documentary is slated to be shown on WYES at 7 p.m. Wednesday night.

"It's such a part of the fabric of New Orleans and of Faubourg St. John," Laborde said about her latest piece. "It means so much to the neighborhood and the culture of New Orleans."

"New Orleans Fair Grounds Memories," which is designed to be nostalgic, also includes a great deal of New Orleans history. Before it became officially known as the Fair Grounds in 1872, it was used for exhibitions, boxing and baseball games. The site was also used during the Civil and Spanish-American Wars as a campground.

According to the documentary, horses were raced at the Fair Grounds before Churchill Downs was built, and before the first Kentucky Derby was run. Union Gen. George Armstrong Custer took his horses there, and President Ulysses S. Grant. was known to visit.



*The New Orleans Fair Grounds (photo credit: Alexander Barkoff).*

Now, the race track is remembered in the documentary by New Orleans characters who have more recently made the destination a home away from home. Laborde interviewed Allen “Blackcat” LaCombe, a legendary handicapper and publicist for the Fair Grounds Race Course for over thirty years, as well as Joe Brown and his wife, Dorothy Dorsett Brown, who kept more than forty horses at the site.

Journalists Angus Lind and Ronnie Virgets were also interviewed, as was New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival Executive Director Quint Davis.

Many interviewees, including Lamarque, talk about the race track’s endeared traditions, such as race season’s opening every Thanksgiving Day, when women are known to don extravagant hats.

“There’s nothing better than to be there for Thanksgiving,” Lamarque says in the film.

James Gill, a columnist for The Advocate, agrees.

“Everyone’s in a good mood,” he says. “They think they can win some money.”

The documentary remembers the tough times, too — including a fire that destroyed a historic building, and damage incurred by Hurricane Katrina. But above all, it pays homage to the site that has become a neighborhood fixture in Faubourg St. John, and attracts thousands from all over the world every year for the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival.

“It’s in a completely urban setting, and now for many years we’ve had the Jazz Fest there, which has become a big part of this city too,” said Lind. “So between the racing and the Jazz Fest, I’d say the Fair Grounds is a very valuable asset to the city.”