

The West Texas Fair time forgot

By [Rick Smith](#) Posted April 30, 2011 www.gosanangelo.com

SAN ANGELO, Texas — San Angelo's best-kept secret may be one of the most popular events the city has ever seen.

Have you ever heard of the Concho Valley Fair?

Neither had I. And neither had Larry Riemenschneider.

Larry's a Veribest farmer with a passion for archaeology. He spends his time away from farming searching for the past.

Recently he made one of his biggest-ever discoveries. Larry unearthed a mile-long horse racing track used by the Concho Valley Fair from 1889 to around 1930.

The fair was the great-grandfather of the present-day San Angelo Stock Show and Rodeo.

The fairground, just east of San Angelo, covered 100 acres and included a grandstand large enough to hold 1,000 spectators and a three-story exposition building where local and area residents showed off everything from their farm produce to fancy needlework.

The fair's biggest attraction was horse racing, which was huge in turn-of-the-century Texas. The fair's promoters hired a man who had built tracks across Texas to build a banked one for San Angelo.

The grandstand area also included a saloon under the stands and 200 stalls for animals.

Thanks to the newly arrived railroad, thousands of people from across the state traveled to the fair, which also featured rodeo-style events like calf roping and bucking broncs.

Papers of the day, including the San Angelo Standard (as it was called back then) and The Dallas Morning News, praised the fair as one of the most important events to occur in San Angelo and West Texas at the end of the 19th century, perhaps as important as the coming of the railroad.

Praise doesn't get much better than that.

It must have seemed like something so successful it would go on forever.

But somehow, over the years, the fair began declining until its final performance, about 1930, when it was reduced to "terrapin (turtle) racing."

In the years afterward, the grounds were swept clean of all traces of buildings. All that remains today is the outline of the racetrack.

Larry's trying to track down the missing puzzle pieces of the fair's history, studying everything from scholarly research to old newspaper articles.

He originally stumbled across the story of the fairground by accident while doing research at Angelo State University's West Texas Center on something else — a Concho River crossing.

Suzanne Campbell, the archive's director, had heard of the crossing.

"It's near the old fairgrounds," she told him.

But no one seemed to know exactly where the fairgrounds had been.

Larry tracked down the oval-shaped track using satellite photos from Google Earth. One of the views clearly shows the big oval. Using the coordinates, Larry found the site, which is on property managed by Jack Hutchison.

With Jack's permission, he hiked the area, searching for the track.

"I started walking and then stopped. I could see I was on the track." He found sure signs, including the banked turns.

How could the imprint have survived more than a century and still be seen from outer space?

The plants that outline the track are called white brush, vegetation that thrives on soil that's been disturbed. Larry said prehistoric sites often are discovered because of the white brush on them.

Larry's work isn't over yet. He and Suzanne are trying to collect as much information as possible about the Concho Valley Fair.

"I would say 99 percent of the people around here have never heard of it," Larry told me. "It was hidden, lost. But now we're trying to bring back its story."

If you have memories, newspaper clippings or photos, please contact Larry Riemenschneider, 653-8216 (larremjo@wcc.net) or Suzanne Campbell, 942-2164, (suzanne.campbell@angelo.edu.)

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