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County officials see an asset to help pay for new facility

# Fairgrounds market value

## Sale would break promise, vets say

By GARY HARMON  
The Daily Sentinel

There's a long history of promise to Intermountain Veterans Memorial Park, and an equally long history of promises, some broken, some forgotten, some fulfilled but now grown old.

And some just left behind. One that meets all those descriptions is the memorial to veterans who left their homes in 32 counties of western Colorado and eastern Utah to go to wars in Europe, Asia and elsewhere. The memorial stands at the farthest reaches of the Mesa County

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See PROMISE, page 6A ▶

## Arena is developer's only priority

By MIKE WIGGINS  
The Daily Sentinel

Two months after setting the Grand Valley abuzz by announcing a plan to build a civic arena near downtown Grand Junction, local business owner and commercial developer Reed Mitchell is busy putting his words into action.

See ARENA, page 7A ▶

### BY THE NUMBERS: Proposed Riverside Arena

- 2 restaurants
- 20 luxury suites
- 20 potential full-time jobs
- 75 potential part-time jobs
- 2,500 parking spaces
- 5,000 fixed seats
- 8,000 seating capacity with expansion
- 27,500-square-foot floor and several meeting rooms
- 141,000 square feet

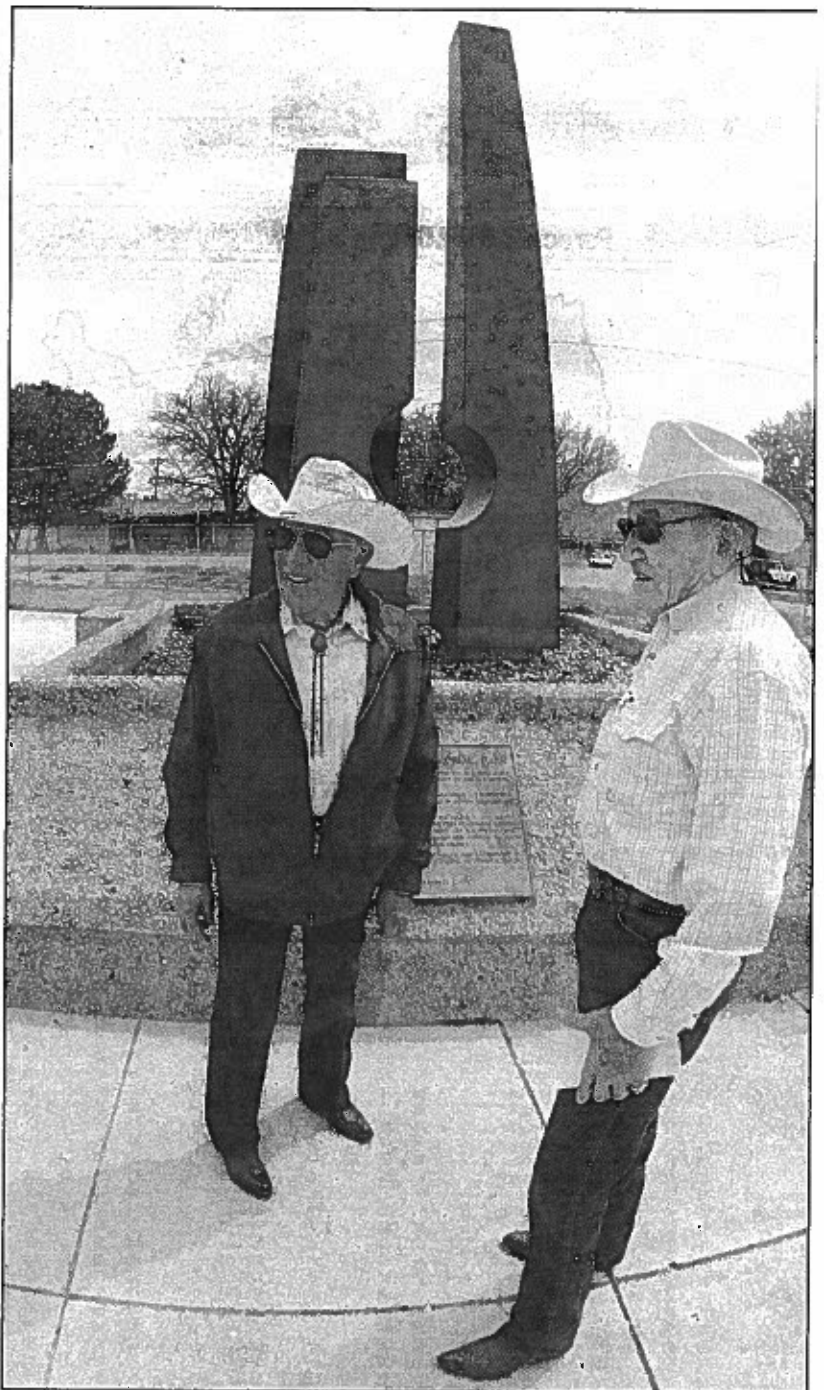
Source: Reed Mitchell



ROBERT GARCÍA/The Daily Sentinel

*"If we had 10,000 seats, I think the events would fill them."*

Event promoter Darren Cook



CHRISTOPHER TOMLINSON/The Daily Sentinel

JOHN FREZIERES, LEFT, and Jack Lucas are two of the three surviving members of the Intermountain Veterans Memorial Association, which sold its park to Mesa County in 1967 for \$85,000. The organization turned down an offer from a California developer for triple the amount. The war memorial shown in the background was erected later.

# Dairy farm parcel becomes veterans' memorial; a park grows into county fairgrounds

**DECEMBER 1944** — A group of five men drafted a plan to form the Intermountain Veterans Association to build the Intermountain Veterans Memorial Park on more than 90 acres of the former Hinman Dairy farm. The nonprofit's park was intended to honor veterans, living and dead, and to foster patriotism.

**THE EARLY 1960s** — The county agreed to place the Intermountain Veterans Memorial Park on the tax rolls after its founders realized they could not sustain the park as they initially envisioned it.

**JULY 1967** — The county purchased the Intermountain Veterans Memorial Park for \$85,000 even after a California developer offered \$250,000 for the park.

**LATE 1980s** — The Intermountain Veterans Memorial Park stops hosting horse races during the summer and horse training during the winter.

**1991** — The nonprofit organization takes over the Intermountain Veterans Memorial Park.

**1993** — The Mesa County Commission cancels a contract that had allowed the Intermountain Veterans Memorial Park's board to operate the county-owned facility. The commission's decision came after the board's debt reached \$36,676.

**March 2001** — The Mesa County Commission renames the Intermountain Veterans Memorial Park the Mesa County Fairgrounds.



**THE 1950s** — Promoters from Denver add a dog track to the Intermountain Veterans Memorial Park. The dog track's construction and use forced many organizations and events to relocate away from the park, including the 4-H fair and the Rodeo Cowboys Association rodeo. After two years, however, the track, dubbed the Uranium Downs Race Track, was closed after business was bad.

**1966** — The U.S. Veterans Administration begins its talks with the county to facilitate the sale of the Intermountain Veterans Memorial Park.

**MID-1980s** — The Intermountain Veterans Memorial Park becomes home to a large betting business based around the park's horse racing.

**1990** — The county closes the Intermountain Veterans Memorial Park while a nonprofit of the same name was formed to manage the park.

**1992** — Fair attendance reaches 38,555 following the addition of new grandstand entertainment. The attendance spike follows the 1991 fair, which garnered roughly 3,500 attendees.

**1998** — Attendance at the Mesa County Fair falls below 8,000, prompting the Mesa County Commission to give the fairgrounds \$60,000 to improve its facilities.

ROBERT GARCIA/The Daily Sentinel

is oriented in the opposite direction, toward B Road. The fairgrounds grandstand, Jack Wadlow Memorial Stadium, blocks any view of the veterans memorial from the highway.

Drivers passing the memorial on B Road have no way to find out what it is because there is no access from B Road into the fairgrounds.

That the memorial isn't doing the job it was intended to do is a point that Frezieres concedes.

That it ought to be moved is a point he won't.

"We need to get some signs around it" to explain to passers-by what the memorial is, he told Lucas last week during a visit to the park.

### Veterans sell park

Frezieres, Lucas and Keith Mumby are the last of the original members of the Intermountain Veterans Memorial Association, which sold the park to the county in 1967.

Frezieres, a Korean War veteran, and Lucas, a World War

II vet, contend the promise was made then, when the association agreed to the county's offer of \$85,000 for the park. The veterans rejected a Californian's offer of \$250,000, they said, because the county agreed to fulfill the promise of using the land as a center for remembering veterans, promoting agriculture and offering cultural experiences, not just for Grand Junction but for a region stretching from the Continental Divide to the Wasatch Front in Utah.

The Californian wanted to build condos, Frezieres said.

Mumby said the details are hazy but "I'm 100 percent in accord with the philosophy that (the park) should not be sold."

If there's anything perpetual about the park, it's that it's long on promise, short on delivery.

Horse racing didn't last. A dogged effort to call the track Uranium Downs and run greyhounds failed.

Hopes that the fairgrounds would spark development such

as new hotels and restaurants on Orchard Mesa never bore fruit.

"Throughout its 50-year life, the facility has been plagued by two problems," says a 2003 analysis of the fairgrounds written for the Mesa County Commission. "One, it has tried to perform too many diverse functions with no overall strategic directive. Two, it has never had a long-term and consistent commitment of funds and a management structure geared to use of those funds to reach a defined strategic objective."

The county should be seeking Great Outdoors Colorado grants every year for the park, said Frezieres, who said he wants the county to go back to referring it as Intermountain Veterans Memorial Park, not the Mesa County Fairgrounds.

However stunted the park might be these days, it's possible that the east end of the property, which contains the stadium, what remains of the track, the covered pavilion and arena, the community building and stalls, could be a cash cow for a new fairgrounds on land adjoining a new civic arena.

Tom Fisher, regional services director for the county, is charged with investigating whether there's new promise for the agricultural and patriotic purposes that Intermountain Veterans Park was to fulfill.

The possibility of building new facilities in the same area as the proposed Riverside Arena, Fisher said, promises a synergy, the ability to accomplish more with those facilities together than could be done with far-flung attractions.

A new outdoor arena and dirt-floor indoor arenas for equestrian and other agricul-

tural events, and new display buildings, barns and stalls and other facilities could be a new home to the Mesa County Fair.

The way to pay for them would be to sell off the old fairgrounds, leaving intact the west end of the park on Orchard Mesa for the Little League diamonds, open space and Tri-River Extension Service.

There's no doubt that new facilities are needed, fairgrounds users and other officials say.

Mesa County, for instance, has no public indoor, dirt-floor arena for equestrian events, which puts it at a competitive disadvantage with Rifle and Delta, both of which sport indoor arenas.

"We tried and tried," said Caesar Dotta of Grand Junction, a longtime member of the Mesa County Fair Board who also puts on equestrian events. "We were going to get an indoor thing going. It just never materialized."

An indoor horse arena would be an economic boon on more than one level, he said.

### Indoor horse arena

Participants need hotel rooms, restaurant meals and all the trappings of travel, he said.

If the county builds "a nice facility, people buy homes for just that reason and say nothing about spending \$200,000 for a barn" for their animals, he said.

The fair facilities badly need updating and expansion, Dotta said, if for no other reason than to make sure that various displays don't suffer for their proximity to one another.

"It's pretty sad when you work six months on a quilt and it smells like horse manure" after a few days of display at the fair, he said.

Wadlow Memorial Stadium has worked well for a long time, said Darren Cook of Extreme Promotions, which put on this weekend's motorcycle Supercross event at the fairgrounds.

But the times are changing.

Wadlow Arena seats 3,000 people and "we're needing a facility with three to four times the number of seats," Cook said. "If we had 10,000 seats, I think the events would fill them."

The Riverside Arena could draw events such as his away from the fairgrounds, Cook said.

"We've had price increases and we can't pull more spectators," Cook said. "We're still limited to 3,000 people even though expenses have gone up."

While they're performing a feasibility study, county officials are running a title search to see whether they're legally limited in what they can do with the park, Fisher said. If there's a contractual obligation, the county will honor it, Commissioner Steve Acquafresca said.

But if the county does sell the east end of the park on Orchard Mesa, the memorial flame will still have a home, as will the plaques that document the history of the place, said Fisher.

"We'll make sure they get placed," he said.

Fisher, after all, spent a year in Iraq with the National Guard and knows about the promise that awaits and the one that was made.

Intermountain Veterans Memorial Park had a specific purpose, one Fisher said, one "I'm not going to forget."

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