

OPINION

REX NELSON: Where celebrities play

4

By [Rex Nelson](#)

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The photos could be found all over social media last weekend. **Kevin Costner**--the actor, director and musician who has won Academy, Golden Globe and Emmy awards through the years--was in Hot Springs. A photo of Costner standing alongside the new owner of the Arlington Hotel popped up in my Facebook feed. Later, I saw a photo of Costner with the owner of the Gangster Museum of America.

Costner is a horse owner, mind you, and it's not unusual to see famous thoroughbred owners in Hot Springs during the purse-rich stretch run of Oaklawn Park's race meet. So I probably shouldn't have been surprised. There was a day when it was commonplace to see celebrities walking the streets of downtown Hot Springs.

In the collection of historic photographs on display at the Hot Springs Convention Center, my favorite is of boxer Jack Dempsey and actor Rudy Valentino having a meal together at the Arlington. It speaks to the popularity of the Spa City in the 1920s. One of the country's top sports figures and one of its best-known actors were in town at the same time, and no one batted an eye. It's why I wasn't shocked on a visit to the museum in Hershey, Pa., to learn that Milton Hershey, the founder of Hershey Chocolate Co., honeymooned in Hot Springs in 1898. It was a place to see and be seen in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

One week before Costner showed up, I witnessed the grandson and great-grandson of Babe Ruth fall in love with Hot Springs. They were in town for the Hot Springs Baseball Weekend and vowed to come back. Their infatuation with the city the Babe once enjoyed--they stayed at The Waters boutique hotel and sang with the band at the Ohio Club--showed me that downtown is back.

Hot Springs will be hopping again this week as Oaklawn hosts the Racing Festival of the South. The festival kicks off Thursday with the \$150,000 Bachelor Stakes and continues through Saturday with the \$1 million Arkansas Derby. There will be two big races on Friday, the \$600,000 Apple Blossom Handicap and the \$400,000 Fantasy. In addition to the Arkansas Derby, Saturday will see the running of the \$750,000 Oaklawn Handicap, the \$400,000 Count Fleet Sprint Handicap and the \$150,000 Northern Spur Stakes.

Several months ago I spoke to the annual meeting of a group of Hot Springs business leaders known as Fifty for the Future. In the late 1980s, some of those business leaders met with a Little Rock economist named Charles Venus.

"Charles had just completed a study on what makes for successful communities," one of the group's founders told me. "We determined we needed a core group of concerned citizens and a ready bankroll. Hot Springs was at a low point, especially downtown. It was a grim time. There were strip joints up and down Central Avenue along with multiple empty and boarded-up storefronts. The U.S. Department of the Interior was even talking about taking away our national park status and downgrading us to something like a national historic site."

As one of its first efforts in 1987, Fifty for the Future helped create the Downtown Historic District. Since then, the organization has been involved in everything from library millage campaigns to the creation of music, arts and documentary film festivals.

I told the members of the group that because of the revitalization of downtown Hot Springs (especially in the years since the February 2014 Majestic Hotel fire), I'm more optimistic than ever about the future of a city I've been visiting for five decades. It's important for every Arkansan that Hot Springs do well. Despite the recent progress, there's still much to be accomplished.

This was the crux of my speech: For Hot Springs to begin approaching the national cachet it once had, three things must happen during the next five years. They are:

- The proper development of the Majestic Hotel site. After much debate, the city of Hot Springs decided in July 2015 to purchase the Majestic property for \$680,000. Talks with owner Gary Hassenflu of Kansas City about cleaning up the site had been unsuccessful even though the Hot Springs Board of Directors had condemned the burned-out ruins in March 2015.

This is among the most high-profile pieces of real estate in the South. It's the northern anchor of Central Avenue. It represents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the city. Redevelopment ideas have included everything from a thermal pool complex to a park with a large amphitheater. Developers have expressed an interest in partnering with the city. What happens here will go a long way toward determining the trajectory of downtown Hot Springs for decades to come.

- The full development of what's known as the Northwoods property. In October, Visit Hot Springs (the city's convention and visitors organization) announced that it was ready to begin construction on the first phase of a planned 44.6-mile system of mountain biking trails. A \$648,421 grant from the Walton Family Foundation was matched by Visit Hot Springs so a 16-mile segment can be completed.

Northwoods is a 2,000-acre tract of pristine woodlands that the city owns north and west of Park Avenue. Development of this property (there also will be hiking trails and kayaking opportunities on three lakes) for recreational use will attract a new group of young, affluent outdoors enthusiasts to the city.

- Redevelopment of empty downtown structures such as the Medical Arts Building, the Velda Rose Hotel and the Howe/DeSoto Hotel in an effort to add hundreds of new residents downtown. At the

same time, several historic hotels need significant upgrades so the city can attract more upscale visitors. Hot Springs officials should be courting condominium, apartment and hotel developers the same way that other cities market to manufacturers.

Economic development these days is about playing to your strengths. The strength of Hot Springs isn't that it's a manufacturing center. It's that it has a unique downtown connected to a national park. It's a national treasure that's finally ripe for additional development.

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