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Wildwood Farm
Historic thoroughbred spread hopes for listing on register

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Oldham County has a rich tradition of raising horses. The animals are easily seen grazing in the pastures that flank U.S. 42.

Not far from that road, along the Ohio River, is an old jewel of the trade.

Wildwood Farm was one of the county's first farms to breed thoroughbreds, becoming one of the largest racing stables in the Midwest, according to research by Cynthia Johnson, a historic preservation consultant hired by the landowner.

Started by Louisville businessman Woodford Axton in 1929, the 800-acre spread had a dairy farm, a 60-acre apple, pear and peach orchard and a thoroughbred farm that claimed stakes winners, including Two Sons and Paradisical, according to Johnson.

Now the farm is a step closer to being preserved. Last week, the Kentucky Historic Preservation Review Board endorsed listing the property on the National Register of Historic Places, which should help keep the property at 3901 Axton Lane intact. The National Park Service will make the final decision on the listing.

"I don't foresee any problems with it,"

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Horses stood in a barn at Wildwood Farm on Axton Lane. The riverside property has cleared the latest hurdle on the way to being listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The National Park Service will make the final decision on the listing. (Photos by Mary Ann Gerth, The Courier-Journal)

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The farm's main house was erected with limestone quarried on the property. Stephen Campbell is the owner.

said Rachel Kennedy of the Kentucky Heritage Council.

While being listed on the national register doesn't fully protect the farm, it does help the owners qualify for federal or state tax credits for rehabilitation work. "Kentucky has a rich history, and we want to do our small part to preserve it for future generations," said the property's owner, Stephen Campbell.

Campbell, a New York City investment banker who lives in Connecticut, bought the property in 2004.

"If anything should go on the historic register, this farm should," said David Carter, 84, who worked on the breeding farm in 1940. "It was a showplace."

He remembers people trekking from Louisville to visit the 600-acre dairy farm. The Golden Guernsey cows produced Grade A milk, which was unusual in that area. It also employed electric milking machines.

The fresh milk was bottled and trucked to grocery stores in Louisville every day, Carter said.

Betsy's Hopeful, a world-champion milk-producing cow, lived there and had her own sign along Axton Lane, he said.

Wildwood was a "gentleman farm" -- born of the philosophy that it is virtuous to be close to the land, according to Johnson's research.

Axton, who oversaw Axton-Fisher

Tobacco Co., died on the farm in 1935, and his brothers, Edwin and Bob, divided the property. In the 1940s, hogs replaced dairy cattle, and the horse farm was eventually divided into three tracts, according to Johnson.

The main property, now 40 acres, has a main house erected with limestone quarried on the property. It has a smokehouse and springhouse, a paddock and a garden. The main house is 2½ stories, with a one-story servants' wing.

Bill Pace, a Westport business owner familiar with the farm, said he knew a man who rented space there in the 1960s.

They "had some great parties when it was rental property for $100 a month in those days," he said. "The place was just gorgeous. It was set up really nice, (with) pantries and maids' quarters."

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