

Delta Sources and Resources

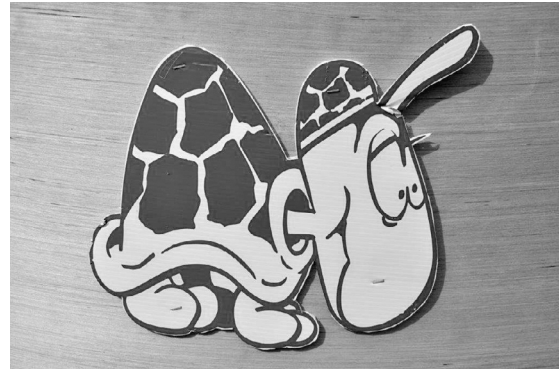
Lepanto Terrapin Derby
Main Street
Lepanto, Arkansas
by Marcus C. Tribbett

Since 1930, on the first Saturday in October, Lepanto, Arkansas, has held an annual tortoise-themed festival revolving around a race of the land-going shell-covered reptiles. After paying an entry fee, racers place their terrapins at the start of a sixty-foot course and . . . they're off! It isn't just for sporting fun and bragging rights, either: the top three finishers receive cash prizes.

Created by the Willie Lamb Post 26 of the American Legion, the Legion sponsored the race until 1981, when Museum Lepanto USA took the reins for nearly two decades. In 1999, the derby was handed over to the Lepanto Fire Department, and according to an online *Encyclopedia of Arkansas* entry by Cindy Grisham, proceeds from the derby are now used to fund fire-fighting equipment and training. The race lasts barely a quarter of an hour, but the festivities occur all day, with thousands flocking to this small farming community to participate in a 5K run, a beauty pageant, and a dance, as well as to listen to live music and enjoy food, games, arts, and crafts.



The 2019 winner with a Lepanto firefighter.
Photograph courtesy of Gregory Hansen.



Terrapin Derby Mascot.
Photograph courtesy of Gregory Hansen.

Unlike other area tortoise races, Lepanto's derby has not been shut down in recent years over questions about the animals' welfare. Legitimate concerns for the tortoises have resulted in the shuttering of most of these races regionally (as is discussed in a 4 August 2019 *Arkansas Democrat Gazette* article by Bill Bowden), but in Lepanto these concerns have been mitigated. Lepanto Derby entrants no longer collect their own reptiles from the wild to race—a practice that removes the terrapins from their nesting sites and natural habitat and sometimes results in their starvation when their well-meaning but misguided captors do not know what to feed them. Entrants today draw numbers for turtles brought by one local supplier.

This year, the October festivities were, however, canceled for the first time in nearly a century, not because the terrapins were sick but because of the threat of human illness: the 2020 derby was one more casualty of the SARS-Covid 2 coronavirus pandemic. With a little luck, it will return in 2021 alongside the little bit of normalcy that even such a quaint and, let's be honest, slightly ludicrous competition represents and that we all crave right about now. Silly fun and camaraderie are sorely missing in many communities these days. When the Lepanto Terrapin Derby brings them back, I certainly plan to be there. ▲▼▲