

Sport of Kings, or Den of Thieves?

by Leonard N. Wynne

Part 2 in a series about horseracing in the early days of Los Angeles County.

Part 1 of this series, [The Sport of Kings in the City of Angels](#), explored horseracing in Los Angeles County from the Spanish Colonial period to the development, then decline, of racing at Agricultural Park.

In 1899, **William Bowen**, a prominent Los Angeles lawyer, led the fight in an election that, despite strong opposition from racing interests, successfully passed a measure to have Agricultural Park annexed into the city of Los Angeles.

The Birth of Ascot Park

It was at this time that one of most prominent horseman in the nation, **Elias Jackson "Lucky" Baldwin**, stepped forward offering to secure the necessary bonds to construct a track on his large estate east of Los Angeles. Baldwin, however, faced opposition from the other racing promoters. Ultimately the major racetrack backers, who had incorporated themselves as the Los Angeles Jockey Club, selected a site south of Los Angeles, located in what would become known as the Harbor Gateway, a narrow strip of land connecting the city of Los Angeles with the port at San Pedro. To the racing promoters the site of the new track – a safe distance from the city of Los Angeles yet still conveniently accessible by the Pacific Electric Railway – seemed to be the ideal location. It was soon announced that the grand new track – with the equally grand name of **Ascot Park** – would be opened by Christmas of 1903.

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As part of their plan, the Los Angeles Jockey Club worked to settle old feuds with their Northern California counterpart, the California Jockey Club, and the two organizations finally reached an agreement to recognize each others' rulings.⁴ The vision of the Los Angeles Jockey Club was to design a new track that would rival the best tracks in the country. Their ultimate goal was to provide Southern California with a racing facility so spectacular that it would justify their argument that the tracks in Northern California should abandon any

attempts to conduct winter race meets. The Ascot promoters believed that Los Angeles – with its sunny climate and throngs of seasonal tourists – should gain exclusive control over of all winter racing in the state.

At Ascot Park the Los Angeles Jockey Club hoped also to distance themselves not only from the city but more importantly from the ever increasing criticism they had faced at Agricultural Park. The major investors in the new track announced their assurances that crooked gambling would never be tolerated at Ascot, and that they were dedicated to building a race track where “..gentlemanly sport alone shall be offered on a large scale to a respectable, order-loving public that will always frown down on the tin-horn gamblers, touts and malcontents generally.”⁵

The track promoters also worked to address some of the concerns that had been earlier voiced by the moral reformers by instituting a track policy barring women from gambling or, for that matter, even attending the races without an escort.

City Politics and Moral Reform

Even before its opening, however, Ascot Park would be mired in controversy. Early on it was discovered that the Los Angeles Supervisors had allowed the carving out of a new district in which Ascot would be located. The Los Angeles Times reported that this haphazardly drawn new district – which resembled an elephant's trunk – clearly had no purpose other than to circumvent the law in order to allow liquor to be sold at Ascot.⁶

Despite the assurances of Ascot's promoters that they would never allow their names to be connected with anything but a totally above-boards racing facility, accusations of dishonestly and crooked gambling soon surfaced again. By this time anti-gambling sentiments were increasing throughout the country. Not only did Ascot face opposition from the moral reformers and religious leaders in the city, but also from the city's leading news sources, including the Los Angeles Times and the Los Angeles Express. By 1905 Ascot was facing accusations of conducting illegal gambling procedures that, with the aid of criminal practices such as doping the horses and fixing races, were allowing the crooked bookmakers to fleece the public.⁷

Furthermore, editorials in the local papers observed that while Ascot in principle had banned women without an escort from attending the races, a trip to the gates of the park made it clear that there always more than enough willing young men who could be “adopted” to fill the required escort role for single women.⁸

The anti-racing opinions of the *Los Angeles Times* earned the adulation of the then influential periodical *Leslie's Weekly*, which praised the paper for its denunciation of the track as “a cancer breeder,” a “sink of iniquity,” and “a rendezvous of thieves, swindlers, and the scum of the country.”⁹ A similar view was expressed in the pages of the *Los Angeles Express* which labeled Ascot “the great running sore on the flesh of Los Angeles.”¹⁰

The increasingly bitter struggle between the moral reformers and Ascot Park ultimately resulted in a showdown at a meeting of the Los Angeles Board of Supervisors on January 8, 1906. Opponents of the racetrack were

hopeful that they would finally convince the Supervisors to ban all racetrack betting in Los Angeles. Three of the five supervisors, however, refused to take action without further study – a decision that earned them a strong rebuke from the Los Angeles Express which published their pictures in the front page the following day.

While the Supervisors' meeting did not bring about the outcome the anti-racing forces had desired, it nevertheless sounded the death knell for Ascot Park. The Los Angeles Jockey Club, although granted a short reprieve, realized that public sentiment against racing in Los Angeles was too strong to just give up the fight. It was clear to both sides in the struggle that the Supervisors who had in past refused to condemn race track gambling would inevitably find themselves fighting to salvage their political careers. It would only be a matter of time before racing was banned – if not by the current Supervisors then by those who would be elected to replace them if they failed to carry out the desires of the voters.

Although the Los Angeles Jockey Club still clung to the hope that Ascot might weather the storm of moral condemnation against it, they nevertheless confronted the reality that the days of racing at Ascot were most likely numbered. Ascot promoters reluctantly accepted that if they wanted to preserve horse racing in Los Angeles they would have to move once again. It would become clear that their best chance of survival lay in the hands of Lucky Baldwin – and this time it would be they who would need to approach him with the hope that his offer to build the track on his rancho was still on the table.¹¹

Part 3 of this series, [The King of Arcadia](#), will focus on a man named “Lucky” Baldwin and his “better racetrack.”

Related post: [Hollywood Park and the Great Fire of 1949](#).

4 LA Times Dec. 13, 1903 B3.

5 LA Times Mar 21, 1903 A1

6 LA Times Dec. 18, 1903. A1.

7 LA Times Mar 16, 1905, 112.

8 Los Angeles Express, December 29, 1905.

9 LA Times Jan 20, 1906 II4

10 Los Angeles Express, January 9, 1906

11 After horse racing left Ascot Park it would become a car racing track. The track

would move later to Gardena where it would remain until its closing in 1990.

Agricultural Park also hosted some car racing until it was demolished in 1910.

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