

The King of Arcadia



Lucky Baldwin and trainer W. McClelland on Baldwin's Training Track, 1887.

Part 3 in a series about horseracing in early Los Angeles County.

By Leonard N. Wynne

A Man Named Lucky

Elias Jackson Baldwin was still a young man when he first arrived in Southern California in 1853. The native Ohioan immediately fell in love with the San Gabriel Valley and proceeded to buy up as much land as possible, envisioning a grand rancho that would one day hold farms, orchards, vineyards and race horses. Over the next two decades Baldwin worked tirelessly towards this goal. Although Baldwin's reputation as both a foolish risk-taker and a lothario grew with each passing year, he came to be known by the nickname "Lucky," most likely because he seemed to always bounce back from any adversity thrown in his path.

By 1875 – after having gained, lost and recouped several fortunes – Baldwin finally had the means to purchase what he viewed as the jewel in the crown of his Southern California empire, the historic **Rancho Santa Anita**.¹ After 20 years of unwavering determination Baldwin held the deed to a significant portion of the San Gabriel Valley, and he could now proceed with fulfilling his vision for the land.

While Baldwin may have had a reputation for being foolish in past investments, few would have said this about his dedication to horse racing. At his Santa Anita Rancho, Baldwin established what was perhaps the best racing stable of the time – producing an unheard of record of four American Derby winners – giving California race horses national attention. By the close of the 19th Century the only thing Baldwin believed to still be missing was a racetrack suitable for the quality of horses coming out of his ranch.

Building a Better Racetrack

When it became clear that the old racetrack at Agricultural Park would be closed down by anti-gambling forces in Los Angeles, Baldwin offered to build a new track on his rancho. The other major racing supporters, however, were not eager to place the track so firmly in Baldwin's hands, deciding instead to build Ascot Park south of Los Angeles. Baldwin, nevertheless, continued with the hope that racing would eventually come to him, working to incorporate the city of Arcadia in 1903.²

For all intents and purposes, Baldwin had secured the land and the assurance that racing could take place in Arcadia without fear of the City or County of Los Angeles interfering. Baldwin, therefore, likely felt a great deal of satisfaction when rising anti-gambling sentiment made it clear that Ascot could not hope to survive in Los Angeles, and the track's backers ultimately approached him for a new location.

When the plans to move racing to Arcadia were announced, the anti-gambling faction in Los Angeles was horrified. In addition to Baldwin, the owners of the new track would include **George Rose**, one of the owners of Ascot who was also one of that track's major bookmakers, and **Barney Schreiber**, the owner of a large racing stable – an alliance that critics of horse racing pointed to as proof that all of the assurances that racing at the new track would be honest were nothing more than thinly veiled deceit.

Further raising the ire of those most vocal in their opposition to racetrack gambling was the decision to build the new track in Arcadia. The *Los Angeles Times* argued that while Ascot was merely a racetrack, the new park in Arcadia would be far worse because of its connections with Baldwin's town, especially his Oakwood Hotel. The Oakwood, the *Times* claimed, had “long been notorious as the biggest and most gilded of the road houses on the 'Devil's Highway.’”³ The bringing together of the Oakwood Hotel and a new racetrack, the *Times* proclaimed, would create a “permanent blot on the reputation of Southern California.”⁴

What, perhaps, infuriated the anti-gambling forces the most was the fact that Arcadia, as a newly incorporated city, was no longer bound by any laws the Los Angeles County Supervisors might pass. The *Times* denounced the incorporation of Arcadia as having been achieved deceptively by Baldwin, whom the paper accused of having populated his rancho with temporary residents in order to reach the population of 500 required for incorporation. “The 'town,' the *Times* said of Arcadia, “although legally incorporated, is a fake. It is no town at all. 'Lucky' is the town.”⁵

Despite the outcries of the anti-racetrack gambling faction, the development of the track that was being referred

to at this time as the new Ascot Park was well underway. As late as September of 1907, however, there were still many involved with Ascot Park, including George Rose, who did not yet want to give up all hope that the track might survive. The grandstands at Ascot were repainted just in case a last minute reprieve might come through to save racing in Los Angeles.⁶

By the middle of November 1907 it was clear that the new Santa Anita Park racetrack would become the home of horseracing in Los Angeles County. Lucky Baldwin had secured a promise from the Santa Fe Railroad – which already serviced his rancho – to provide low cost tickets from Los Angeles. Additionally, Baldwin had worked out arrangements to have both Huntington Drive and the Pacific Electric Railway line extended to the site of the new track. Rushing to complete the grandstands and stables for some 600 horses in time for a December opening, extra workers were hired and construction on the new track proceeded around the clock.

The Jewel of Horseracing

On Saturday, December 07, 1907, Santa Anita Park opened its gates to a large anxiously waiting crowd that included many state and local officials. That first day of racing in Arcadia provided a full card featuring the Pomona Handicap – won by a longshot, Mark Anthony II. It was, by most accounts, a memorable day in racing. Even some of those present who had been very vocal in their opposition to racetrack gambling – although not changing their views on gambling – found themselves admitting that the new facility was indeed beautiful. In fact, many argued that the new track, with the San Gabriel Mountains serving as a backdrop, could no claim no rival in the nation.

As this first day of racing at Santa Anita unfolded, the *Los Angeles Times* observed, there was Lucky Baldwin, the “Emperor of Arcadia,” who stood at the top of the stands like “Wellington at Waterloo,” surveying his grand achievement. A half century after he had first arrived in the San Gabriel Valley, Lucky Baldwin was able to take satisfaction in having achieved his dream of building a horse racing empire in Southern California.⁷

Part 4, [***Baldwin's Luck Runs Out***](#), continues with the end of racing in California, Baldwin's death and the closure of his Santa Anita.

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[*Hollywood Park and the Great Fire of 1949*](#)

1 *The Santa Anita Rancho, which included what is now Arcadia and Monrovia and was centered on the lake in the present Los Angeles County Arboretum, passed through five owners from the original grant to Hugo Reid in 1839 until it was purchased by Baldwin.*

2 *According to Dana Dunn, Curator of the Arcadia History Museum,*

Baldwin is often wrongly said to have been the first mayor of Arcadia. He was in fact President of the Board of Trustees and a council member. The office of Mayor was not created in Arcadia until 1927.

3 *Los Angeles Times* Sept. 25, 1907, B1.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Los Angeles Times*, September 16, 1907, 113.

7 *Los Angeles Times*, December 8, 1907, VIII 1.

Photo courtesy of Arcadia Public Library.

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