

## **Baldwin's Luck Runs Out**



*Lucky Baldwin's Santa Anita Racetrack, c. 1908.*

### **Part 4 in a series about horseracing in early Los Angeles County.**

*by Leonard N. Wynne*

When the original **Santa Anita** opened on December 7, 1907, **Lucky Baldwin** was feeling on top of the world. After 50 years of steadfast determination he had finally witnessed the fulfillment of his fondest dream. The man whom the *Los Angeles Times* had dubbed the “Emperor of Arcadia” was now the owner of an extensive stretch of land in the San Gabriel Valley that was home not only to one of the most successful racing stables in North America, but also to a first-rate racing facility that even the critics of horse racing were calling the “prettiest track in the America.”

Racing supporters in Southern California were likewise overjoyed with the opening of Santa Anita, for at long last they had a racecourse that could rival that of any other state in the nation. Indeed, Santa Anita did prove to be a racetrack worthy of notice, as world records quickly began to fall on the one-mile oval that was considered to be the fastest track in the nation.

### **Lingering Hostility**

While the opening day at Santa Anita was one of jubilation for all involved, there was a dark cloud looming just over the horizon. The early 1900s were, after all, the height of the Progressive Era in the United States, and across the nation – from city hall to the nation's capital – politicians were pledging to vanquish corruption in all its forms. Going hand in hand with the rise of the Progressives, the nation also witnessed the strengthening of moral reform movements, which viewed activities such as drinking and gambling to be detrimental to the nation's moral fiber. Since racetracks generally offered both of these perceived vices, they would become especially troublesome targets for the reformers.

At the turn of the 20th Century, horse racing in Los Angeles had moved from Agricultural Park to Ascot Park, and then ultimately to Santa Anita, driven mostly by the desire to evade the growing anti-gambling influences in the city and county governments. By 1907, however, the anti-gambling forces had become more than just a local concern – they were now a force to be reckoned with in state politics as well. Across the nation states had begun to ban racetrack gambling, so it was not unexpected when an anti-racetrack gambling law began making its way through Sacramento. The 1907 bill passed the State Assembly and was then sent on to the Senate for a vote. The State Senate, however, refused to pass the measure without further study. The bill was then forwarded for review by the Committee on Public Morals, and here it effectively died. <sup>1</sup>

## Moral Reform Becomes Law

The defeat of the 1907 Anti-racetrack Gambling Bill incensed the moral reformers in California, who made it clear that in the upcoming elections they would hold each candidate's stance on racetracks to be a litmus test for their qualification for office. When the California Legislature convened the following year a new round of anti-gambling legislation was introduced. The **Walker-Otis Bill** – which was copied almost verbatim from the Agnew-Hart Bill introduced in New York – found far more support in Sacramento this time around. Just a little more than a year after the opening of Santa Anita, on February 4, 1908, both houses of the California Legislature passed the Walker-Otis Bill and sent it on to Governor James Gillett to sign. California racing, the *New York Times* proclaimed, had received a “fatal blow.”<sup>2</sup>

## The Collapse of the Baldwin Empire

It was, perhaps, no coincidence that, as the Walker-Otis Bill was in the process of being passed in Sacramento, Lucky Baldwin suffered what was reported to be a nervous collapse on February 3, 1908. Although the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the “King of the Turf” was near death, and not expected to live out the night, Baldwin managed to cling to life for nearly a month.<sup>3</sup>

Then, on March 1, 1909, a double tragedy struck. In the second race of the day a fatal accident claimed the life of a jockey, and at the nearby rancho Lucky Baldwin, at the age of 81, succumbed to pneumonia. The dark clouds that had been looming on the horizon finally moved in and cast a pall over the racetrack. When the gates of Santa Anita re-opened two days later, the atmosphere at the track and the hope for its survival were anything but optimistic.

Although the discovery of a loophole in the Walker-Otis law would allow gambling at California tracks to continue for almost two more years, there was little discussion of a third season of racing in Arcadia.<sup>4</sup> In the minds of most involved with California horse racing, the passage of the Walker-Otis law had assured that the end of racetrack gambling in California was now a foregone conclusion. By this time, racing interests in California had begun working out an agreement with the government of Mexico to move racing south of the border. American horsemen would organize the **Tia Juana Jockey Club**, and soon it was announced that racing would once again live in California, albeit in Baja and not Alta California.<sup>5</sup>

As for Santa Anita, there appeared to be everywhere a sorrowful sense that the track's fate had been sealed with the death of Lucky Baldwin. As the end of the race meet neared, Santa Anita's owners found themselves having to issue free admission tickets in order to attract the crowds that once packed the grandstands. While there was some discussion of how the track might be utilized in the future – perhaps as a training facility for the races in Mexico – most agreed that although Santa Anita was owned by the racing association, without Lucky Baldwin the track could not hope to survive.

On April 17, 1909 Lucky Baldwin's precious Santa Anita Park opened its gates for the final time. Harry Carr of

the *Los Angeles Times* – which had long been a harsh critic of racing – was on hand to record his final reflections on the last day of racing at the track that Lucky Baldwin had built. Following the call to the post for the final race at Santa Anita, Carr rather smugly observed, the band in the grandstand began to play *Auld Lang Syne*.

*For a moment it looked as though the rotten old gambling hell would close its doors with a touch of real sentiment, but the sharp jingle of the bell in the betting ring suddenly interrupted the sorrowful music. At the sound, all sentiment was forgotten, and the eager, excited mob almost plunged headlong down the grand stand stairs to get to the bookies before the last bet. The band was left to toot its sad remarks out into the empty air.<sup>6</sup>*

**Part 5, Days of Auld Lang Syne**, explores Arcadia in the years without racing.

Related posts:

Part 1, [The Sport of Kings in the City of Angels](#)

Part 2, [Sport of Kings, or Den of Thieves?](#)

Part 3, [The King of Arcadia](#)

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

1 Hitchborn, Franklin, *The Story of the Session of the California Legislature 1909*. 32

2 *New York Times*, February 5, 1909, 8.

3 *Los Angeles Times*, February 4, 1909, 11.

4 Both Walker-Otis and New York's Angew-Hart laws had wording that did not expressly prohibit verbal wagering. The bookmakers worked out an elaborate scheme which used a middle-man in the betting ring to circumvent the law. By 1911 both states had amended their laws to close all possible loopholes. Hitchborn, Franklin, *The Story of the Session of the California Legislature 1911*, 183-7.

5 The spelling the Anglo owned organization and the press used at the time was Tia Juana. Only later, after the second track at Agua Caliente was built would they use the Spanish Tiajuana. *Los Angeles Times*, March 18, 1909, 17.

6 *Los Angeles Times*, April 18, 1909 III.

Photo courtesy of Library of Congress.

**Leonard N. Wynne** is a lifelong fan of horse racing and its history. Wynne earned a Bachelor of Arts in History from Cal Poly Pomona, and holds advanced degrees in History from Cal State Los Angeles and the University of California, Santa Cruz. He is currently on leave from PhD program in History, UCSC. His areas of specialization include 19th Century United States with an emphasis on religion and gender and Popular Culture in the United States.