

Days of Auld Lang Syne: Arcadia in the Years Without Racing

by Leonard N. Wynne



Balloons at Ross Field, Arcadia, c. 1919

Part 5 of a 7-part series about horseracing in early Los Angeles County.

Racing Without Wagering?

On the second day of March in 1909, the racetrack at **Santa Anita**, all of the local saloons, and many of the other businesses in Arcadia, closed their doors for the day. That morning some 4,000 people solemnly passed through the great parlor of the Queen Anne Cottage where the body of **Lucky Baldwin**, the “King of Arcadia,” lay in state. Later that same afternoon a private railroad car, bound for San Francisco, bore Baldwin away from Arcadia, and his beloved Santa Anita, for the final time.

With the passage of the **Walker-Otis Anti-racetrack Gambling Law**, and the death of Lucky Baldwin a month later, few expected racing to ever return to Santa Anita. After only two seasons of racing, the final day of the meet at what had been dubbed the “prettiest track in America” was expected to also bring about the last day of racing ever in California. This prospect dismayed the supporters of horse racing, while, at the same time, it elated its opponents such as the *Los Angeles Times*, in which the report of “No More Racing After Today” was prefaced with: “THANK GOD.”¹

When the gates of the original Santa Anita closed for the final time on April 18, 1909, the fate of the great racetrack was still uncertain. There were those who argued that stands and stables contained a fortune in lumber and other materials that could be dismantled and sold off piece by piece. Another group proposed that Santa Anita should be preserved and converted into the primary training facility for the races expected to soon take place across the border in Mexico. One final group suggested that perhaps there was enough love for the sport that racing could resume at Santa Anita the following winter, even without gambling.²

The idealism of this final group, however, was countered by an opinion that was probably best expressed by R. N. Fager, one of the builders of Santa Anita. Fager – who himself was preparing to depart for a new racetrack in Vancouver – expressed his belief that racing would return to Santa Anita in the future, but there was little money to be made in races without gambling.³

Fager's remarks spoke to the reality that, in that day, as it is presently, adequately maintaining thoroughbreds

was a costly venture. Soon after Santa Anita closed to racing, some 600 horses remained in the stables, and the continued cost of their upkeep became a major concern for many smaller owners who did not have the means to simply ship them elsewhere. Faced with mounting costs, and little chance to recoup their expenditures, many of these owners were forced to sell off their horses to racing interests in Canada and Mexico – often at a fraction of their value. Lined up outside of the track, the train cars that once delivered the finest horses in the nation to Santa Anita were now tightly packed and headed to destinations outside of California where racetrack gambling was still legal. Before long Santa Anita, which had once been virtually a city unto itself, was nothing more than a ghost-town.

By 1912, horse racing was all but gone from the state of California, and Baldwin's Santa Anita now stood as a silent reminder of days gone by for racing in Southern California. During this time the growing city of Arcadia undertook an effort to change its image. The new city leaders hoped to demonstrate that Arcadia had “reformed” itself, and that it was no longer the city of saloons and gambling many had considered it to be during the short life of Santa Anita.⁴

In 1912 the citizens of Arcadia voted to ban liquor licensing in their city. At nearly the same time, on last day of January of that year, the grandstands at Santa Anita were burned to the ground by a late night fire attributed to “tramps.”⁵

While Arcadia in 1913 was moving to distance itself from the shadow of Santa Anita, the spirit of Baldwin's love for racing was still very much alive in the city. That same year the final settlement of Lucky Baldwin's will left the bulk of his estate – worth at the time an estimated \$25 million – to his daughters **Clara** and **Anita**. Nearly 30 years younger than her sister Clara, it would be Anita Baldwin who would do the most to carry on her father's legacy.⁶

Anita immediately established the **Anoakia Breeding Farm**, opening up large portions of the rancho to raise a variety of horses and livestock. Especially important to Anita was her desire to once again have the Baldwin name prominent in the horse racing world. Two years later, in 1915, Anita escorted a number of horses to the Pan Pacific International Exposition being held in San Francisco. It was there, to the cheers of the crowd, that the black with red Maltese cross racing colors of Lucky Baldwin appeared, marking the reentry of the Santa Anita stables into horse racing. Leading the triumphal parade of Anita's stable was none other than **Rey El Santa Anita**, perhaps the most famous horse in the nation at the time, and still a prize winner at 24 years of age.⁷

Balloons and Blimps

The promise of the Pan Pacific Exposition would soon be overshadowed when, just two years later, the nation found itself being drawn into the First World War. The entry of the United States into the war brought to an end several years of speculation regarding the fate of the old racetrack. Rumors that had been circulating since 1907 that Santa Anita might be used for auto racing, or perhaps even an amusement park, were laid to rest when Anita Baldwin sold the land to the County of Los Angeles. The County, in turn, deeded the land to the Army,

which was seeking a location for a new Air Corps balloon training school. Santa Anita's stables were converted into barracks and offices, and soon the newly named **Ross Field** was in operation. The arrival of the air base would bring new prosperity to Arcadia – along with a measure of added respectability that the city had sought since the closure of the racetrack.

For Arcadia, however, the boon of suddenly playing host to a thriving military base of 3,500, and witnessing the daily comings and goings of the impressive airships from Ross Field, would be short-lived. By the time the war came to an end in 1919, balloons and dirigibles had been supplanted by airplanes as the future of air power for the military. No longer needed by the Air Corps, Ross Field would be dismantled, and the land given back the county. Soon all that remained in the open fields was the outline of the great oval that was once hailed as the fastest track in the nation.

Gone But Not Forgotten

The year 1919 also marked the beginning of the end for the Baldwin racing stables. On the first day of July that year, Rey El Santa Anita, the star of the Baldwin rancho, died in his stall at the age of 29. In a ceremony befitting his kingly appellation, Rey El Santa Anita was buried with his racing colors and the records of his achievements alongside Baldwin's other great American Derby winners. Fulfilling the final wishes of her father, Anita had a great [Maltese Cross](#) erected to mark the location where the champions of the Baldwin stable were laid to rest.⁸

Over the next decade, even as the nation would find itself sinking into the Great Depression, Arcadia continued to grow and prosper. In just over 20 years the town, once derided for its saloons and racetrack, had transformed itself into the “Queen of the Foothills,” a city of homes, schools, churches, and a thriving business district. Virtually all that remained of the once mighty horse racing empire that Lucky Baldwin had built was the great Maltese Cross, standing in an increasingly lonely grove of trees on the old rancho. Yet there in that grove, as on the bustling streets of the new Arcadia, whispers would soon be heard that horse racing was about to return to the Queen of the Foothills.

*In part 6, **Pretender to the Throne**, Joseph Smoot enters the scene and construction begins on a new track in Arcadia, scheduled for a February, 1932 opening.*

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- 1 Los Angeles Times, March 3, 1909, II3.
- 2 Racing without gambling actually did occur prior to 1933, although this was primarily at racetracks connected to county fairs, where spectators came to see not only horse and harness racing, but other events such as chariot racing as well.
- 3 Los Angeles Times/, April 19, 1909 15.
- 4 McAdam & Snider Arcadia: Where Ranch and City Meet, (Arcadia: Friends of the Arcadia Library), 1981, 95.
- 5 Los Angeles Times/, Feb. 1, 1912, II. It has been suggested that it was more than just pure coincidence that fires that destroyed the racetrack and the Baldwin's Oakwood Hotel a few months prior at the same time the city was battling to ban liquor sales. See McAdam & Snider Arcadia: Where Ranch and City Meet
- 6 It is sometimes mistakenly assumed that Santa Anita was named after Anita Baldwin. Anita, however, was not born until 1876 so, if anything, it was she who was named after the rancho.
- 7 Los Angeles Times/, July 2, 1919.
- 8 Los Angeles Daily Times/, July 2, 1919.

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