

## Pretender to the Throne



*Anita Baldwin*

**Part 6 of a 7-part series about horseracing in early Los Angeles County.**

*by Leonard N. Wynne*

### **Revenue Trumps Morality**

In 1932, as the United States was in the midst of the Great Depression, economic hardships helped loosen the influence of the moral reform movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Despite a national ban on alcohol, and laws against gambling in most states, the fact remained that many people would continue to drink and gamble – whether it was legal or not. Moreover, as the Depression worsened, cash-strapped state governments would begin to view racetrack gambling as a source of much needed revenue. With the adoption of the French pari-mutuel style of wagering – a system seen as far more honest, and assuring the states a

percentage of each wager – racetracks began to reopen across the nation.

## Enter Smoot

In the spring of 1932, the whispers that had been heard around the city of Arcadia that horse racing was about to make a comeback proved to be more than just rumors with the arrival in town of a man named **Joseph Smoot**. A well-known figure in the horse racing world, Joe Smoot was the man credited for getting the racetrack at Hialeah built several years prior. Now, in partnership with **Anita Baldwin**, Smoot announced that he was anxious to do in Arcadia what he had already done in Florida – build a first-rate racing facility.

The newly formed **Los Angeles Jockey Club** would, however, have several obstacles to face – not the least of which was the fact that gambling was still illegal in California. The immediate issue confronting the plans to build a new racetrack, however, was the need to gain city approval to re-zone the Baldwin rancho. By 1930, Arcadia had grown from a small settlement into a city with a population of more than 5,200 residents. Although Arcadia's business leaders favored the proposed track, an equally powerful coalition of civic leaders representing the city's churches and schools were vocally opposed to the plan. Leading up to the special election in Arcadia, the Los Angeles Jockey Club campaigned energetically to gain community support for the building of the racetrack. Their promises that all building contracts would be awarded to local contractors, and that the track, when finished, would provide the city with many desperately needed jobs, helped swing public opinion in favor of the project. On July 26, 1932, the citizens of Arcadia voted to approve the project by a vote of two to one.<sup>1</sup>

Even before the election took place Smoot, confident that the plan would be approved, began to present his plans for the new Santa Anita Park. The proposed racing facility would have stables to accommodate some 1,500 horses and a luxurious Spanish Colonial style clubhouse and grandstand designed by the noted Los Angeles architectural firm of Walker and Eisen.<sup>2</sup>

Smoot then announced that the track would conduct a winter race meet that would be highlighted by two of the richest stakes races in the nation – the \$50,000 California Derby and \$25,000 Los Angeles Derby. Finally, Smoot boldly announced that the track – if approved – would be ready for its inaugural meeting by February 1933.

Smoot's confidence that the track could be completed and in operation within just a few months reflected a sense of urgency that was grounded in a very justified concern. Although racetrack gambling was still illegal in California, in 1931 the state was experiencing a sudden interest in racetrack building. At the same time that Smoot was presenting his plans for Santa Anita, a Los Angeles businessman named **Alexander Pantages** announced his intention to build a racetrack across town in Inglewood. Meanwhile, a third group, headed by Northern California racing promoter **William Kyne**, was showing interest in building a racetrack in nearby Baldwin Park.<sup>3</sup> Smoot knew all too well that for Santa Anita to dominate racing in Southern California it would have to be in operation before any rivals could pose a challenge.<sup>4</sup> On August 19, 1932, the public was invited to the groundbreaking at Santa Anita – an event marked by the ceremonial uniting of the old with the new, as

Anita Baldwin presented Joe Smoot with a standard bearing colors of the Baldwin racing stables.<sup>5</sup>

By September of 1932 half of the grading of the new oval at Santa Anita had been completed, and work was begun on constructing the stables. Although a proposition to allow racetrack gambling was defeated in the November election, Smoot nevertheless pushed ahead with his plans, announcing that the stables would be ready to accept the first horses within a month. By December, however, progress on the track had slowed, just as the timing of completion took on more urgency with the turf war over Southern California racing again making the news. Although the group headed by Pantages had faded from the scene, the Northern California group headed by William Kyne – now organized as the **California Jockey Club** – announced that they had filed the papers to begin construction of the racetrack in Baldwin Park. Even more troublesome to the backers of the Santa Anita project was Kyne's assertion that double shifts would be employed to have the proposed Baldwin Park track opened by mid-February – a full two weeks before the now delayed opening of Santa Anita.<sup>6</sup>

By early 1933, the threat of competition from the California Jockey Club became less urgent, as that organization had turned its focus to first completing the proposed **Bay Meadows** track in San Mateo. With the construction of Santa Anita still progressing at a slow pace, Smoot and his organization then turned their attention to a special election slated for June – when, for the third time in a decade, a measure to legalize racetrack gambling would be on the ballot.<sup>7</sup>

A far more carefully worded measure than the previous two attempts, **Proposition 3** was approved by a margin of nearly two to one. With the passage of Proposition 3, the State Constitution was amended to allow for pari-mutuel wagering on horse races, and to establish the **California Horse Racing Board** to govern all horse racing in the state. The new CHRB would be given the sole authority to license racetracks for operation in California, and to oversee pari-mutuel wagering – to assure that it was conducted honestly, and that the licensing fees gained by the state were allocated appropriately.

## **Left Holding the Bag**

On July 7, 1933, members of the Citizen's Committee for the Regulation of Horse Racing – having fulfilled their objective of getting Proposition 3 passed – gathered for a luncheon at the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles, to celebrate their victory and to then formally disband. When his turn came address the gathering, Smoot announced that the plans for the completion of Santa Anita would progress immediately, and that he was hopeful that the CHRB would soon grant his organization a permit for at least 50 days of racing. All of the members of the committee, Smoot then announced, would be honored on a golden plaque naming them honorary members of the Los Angeles Jockey Club.<sup>8</sup>

The optimistic tone of the committee luncheon, however, would be overshadowed less than a week later when Anita Baldwin announced her resignation from her position as an honorary director of the Los Angeles Jockey Club. Baldwin's unexpected resignation touched off rumors that all was not right in the organization. For the next two months little progress was made at Santa Anita, increasing speculation about problems brewing in the Los Angeles Jockey Club, and furthering doubts about the future of the Santa Anita project.

The rumors of dissension within the Los Angeles Jockey Club would prove to be accurate when, on July 22, 1933, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the organization had disbanded. It was reported that Joe Smoot – who was primarily the promoter for the organization – had suddenly found himself without the support of his financial backers. Faced with mounting costs, and accusations of unfair labor practices, all work at Santa Anita was abandoned. The Los Angeles Jockey Club's offices in Los Angeles were closed down, and the Arcadia property was returned to Anita Baldwin.<sup>9</sup>

Just a year after the celebratory groundbreaking in Arcadia, Anita Baldwin was left with a property containing nothing more than several empty barns, a partially completed racing oval, and the staked-out building site for a grandstand that was never started. Joe Smoot, meanwhile, vanished from the California horse racing scene just as suddenly and mysteriously as he had appeared some 15 months earlier.

In Part 7, **The Sport of Kings and the Queen of the Foothills**, the conclusion of this series, Charles Strub enters Southern California racing, and Santa Anita Park returns to Arcadia.

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1 Los Angeles Times, July 27, 1932. 4.

2 Ibid., June 25, 1932, 7, June 27, 1932, A12.

3 Ibid., June 20, 1932, A9.

4 On several occasions Smoot was asked about the gambling issue and responded that the track would always honor the law. That expenses were planned to be funded through donations explains why competition was viewed as such a threat to the track.

5 Ibid., August 14, 1932, 18., August 20, 1932, 5.

6 Ibid., December 7, 1932.

7 In 1926 and again in 1932 propositions on the ballot in California were defeated, due in large part to the wording, which stated merely "racing," and called for the creation of a California Racing Board. Many thus argued that this could be applied even to such things as college track meets. Proposition 3 on the June 1933 ballot specified specifically "Horse Racing" and the California Horse Racing Board.

8 Los Angeles Times, July 7, 1933, A11.

9 Ibid., August 9, 1933, A9.

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