

The Maltese Cross

Santa Anita's Monument to California Horse Racing History

By Leonard N. Wynne



The Maltese Cross in the East Paddock Gardens of Santa Anita

In the Southeastern corner of Santa Anita's paddock gardens, tucked away between the entrance gates and the Seabiscuit Court, stands an enormous granite Maltese Cross. Those unfamiliar with the monument, on approaching it for the first time, will learn that this Maltese Cross is more than just a simple monument, but that it is – in fact – a gravestone marking the final resting place of a handful of thoroughbred horses that belonged to Elias Jackson Baldwin (April 3, 1828 – March 1, 1909), perhaps the most significant pioneer of horse racing in Southern California.

Baldwin, nicknamed "Lucky" as the result of several escapes from near-death situations, had come to California in 1853, and settled in San Francisco where he made a fortune in real estate speculation. Eventually Baldwin moved south

where he began to purchase land, most significantly a large portion of Rancho Santa Anita, an old California Land Grant that had originally belonged to a Scottish born Mexican citizen named Hugo Reid. The Rancho Santa Anita land covered what is now the cities of Arcadia, Monrovia and Sierra Madre. Even after selling off large parcels of this land for development, Baldwin retained a large portion of the old rancho, which he dedicated to breeding thoroughbreds. He established the Santa Anita Stables and chose black with a red Maltese cross on the back as his racing colors.

Baldwin soon established himself as one of the most successful thoroughbred breeders in the nation, with his Santa Anita Stables claiming victories in four of the first ten runnings of the American Derby – a record that would not be matched until nearly sixty years later.⁴ While these victories pleased Baldwin, he believed that Southern California had the potential to rival the established eastern tracks with races that could draw national attention. With the failure of two other racetracks in Los Angeles, Southern California horsemen eventually agreed, albeit reluctantly, to Baldwin's proposal to build a new racetrack on his land in Arcadia, where his political influence would assure little resistance from municipal governments.

Hailed as one of the most beautiful tracks in America when it opened in 1907, Baldwin's Santa Anita racetrack would have a very short life. With the passage of the Walker-Otis Anti-Race Track Gambling Bill in 1909, Santa Anita's fate was sealed. A dispirited Baldwin – whose luck had seemingly run out – passed away on his rancho on March 1, 1909. Just over a month later, on April 17, 1909, Baldwin's beloved race track opened its gates for the final time.



Rey El Santa Anita, Foaled 1891.

Rey el Santa Anita, Winner of the 1894 American Derby

With the demise of horse racing in California, Baldwin's daughter Anita continued to run the breeding farm on the rancho. When the last and most famous of Baldwin's four American Derby winners – Rey el Santa Anita – died in 1919, Anita Baldwin fulfilled her father's wishes that his horses be memorialized. Under Anita's direction, the Maltese Cross was erected in the equine cemetery situated in the northwest corner of the rancho near Baldwin's

stables and training track. It would remain in this location for the next thirty years.



The Maltese Cross in its original location on the Baldwin Rancho. Image courtesy of the Arcadia Public Library.

Shortly before the inaugural meet of the modern Santa Anita in December, 1934, members of the board of directors of the Los Angeles Turf Club ventured the short distance from the new track to the location of the Maltese Cross, which they viewed as “hallowed ground,” and a place so important to Santa Anita that they suggested making a “pilgrimage” to the site each year.² It was likely this sense of the importance of the monument to Southern California racing interests that prevented actor Leo Carillo – the owner of a palomino descended from Rey el Santa Anita – from pursuing his plan to acquire the cross and have it moved to his farm in San Diego.

In the years following World War II, the last big portions of Baldwin's ranch were sold off for development driven by the post-war housing boom. In late 1949 the remains of Baldwin's champions and their great grave marker were moved to the modern Santa Anita. On the morning of January 6, 1950, track officials were on hand at the dedication ceremony as jockey Johnny Longden – in the silks of Lucky Baldwin – unveiled the monument linking the present Santa Anita with its historical past.

1Baldwin's four winners were Volante (1885), Silver Cloud (1886), Emperor of Norfolk (1888) and Rey el Santa Anita (1894). Calumet Farm would go on claim seven victories in the American Derby between 1941-1968.

2*The Arcadia News Forecast*, December 7, 1934.