

## The Sport of Kings in the City of Angels

### Part 1 in a Series About Horseracing in Early Los Angeles County

by Leonard N. Wynne



*Racetrack and Grandstand at Agricultural Park, Los Angeles, c. 1900*

### **Horseracing in California Dates to the Spanish Colonial Period**

When California entered the Union in 1850 there was already a well-established tradition of horse racing throughout the state. Prior to California's annexation by the United States, California society was dominated by wealthy *Californios* – the beneficiaries of the dissolution of the original Mission System who were awarded large land grants as a result of their favored status with the governments of Spain and later Mexico. Like many landed elites, the Californios prided themselves on their horsemanship, and the racing of their horses provided a chance for these families to periodically meet in order to claim bragging rights – and perhaps a chance to increase their fortunes in the process.

The most notable race of this period was a match race run in Los Angeles in 1852 between two of the most prominent landowners in Southern California, **José Sepulveda** and former Governor **Pío Pico**.<sup>1</sup> The nine-mile race would become the talk of the state, bringing in spectators and some \$25,000 in wagers from as far north as San Francisco. Because this race was as much about horsemanship as it was about the quality of the horses, Sepulveda and Pico both took the saddle of their respective horses. At the finish of the race it was

Sepulveda, riding his imported Australian Thoroughbred **Black Swan**, who defeated Pico and his California-bred **Sarco**. The victorious Sepulveda walked away from the contest having won from Pico not only the bragging rights, but the winnings which included \$1,500 and 300 head of cattle.<sup>2</sup>

Within a decade of this great match race, the wealthy Californios would see their claims to the old Spanish and Mexican land grants invalidated by the United States Congress in order to open up the land to accommodate the swelling Anglo population. By the end of the 19th Century the Californios had been supplanted by wealthy easterners who eagerly bought up large portions of the former land grants. Like the Californios before them, the new landowning elite of California had a great passion for horse racing, although this passion was fueled far more by financial considerations than by a desire to display their skills in horsemanship. These new California horsemen wanted for Los Angeles what already existed in the East, a permanent racing facility.

### **Los Angeles Gets a Racetrack – Agricultural Park**

By the early 1870s Southern California horse racing had found a home at Agricultural Park, a large area of land just west of the burgeoning city of Los Angeles that had served as the original fairgrounds for the county. When the use of the parkland for its original purpose, as a showcase for modern agricultural advances, declined at the end of the century, the racetrack became the sole active tenant, a situation that would draw increasing disapproval from Angelenos.

Between 1870 and 1900 the city of Los Angeles was experiencing a doubling of its population every decade. Moving outward in all directions from the historical center of the city, the growing population of Los Angeles was increasingly influenced by the moral reform movements of the time. To these reformers, it was bad enough that the track provided both gambling and drinking, but the fact that this occurred in place where men and women of different races mingled was just too much to ignore. **William Bowen**, a prominent lawyer who also taught Sunday School to boys in the chapel of the new University of Southern California – which bordered Agricultural Park on the North – had witnessed a declining attendance at his Sunday School that he immediately blamed on the “orgies” taking place at the racetrack. Bowen believed the racetrack at Agricultural Park fostered a morally reprehensible combination of gambling, drinking and sexual promiscuity that lured the young men into corruption. In 1899 Bowen would lead the fight in an election that, despite strong opposition from racing interests, successfully passed a measure to have Agricultural Park annexed into the city of Los Angeles.<sup>3</sup>

By 1900 the future of racing at Agricultural Park was not hopeful. Seeking to expand and beautify the city, the reformers viewed Agricultural Park as nothing less than a moral blight on the city landscape. Their plans to build gardens and a museum, in what would become Exposition Park, did not include a new racetrack. Moreover, while the track had conducted notable stakes races to attract the finest horses, attendance at the track had been suffering a steady decline. Acknowledging a clear threat to the continuation of racing in Los Angeles, the racing promoters began to seek a new location for racing. While there were great tracks already flourishing on the east coast, Southern California racing supporters were eager to establish a permanent facility in Los Angeles which they hoped would revitalize racing in Southern California.

*In Part 2, [Sport of King, or Den of Thieves?](#), Elias J. “Lucky” Baldwin steps onto the California racing scene and Ascot Park comes to Los Angeles.*

1 Historian Leonard Pitt states that the race took place in October, 1852 while the

Santa Ana Historical Society places the date as March 1, 1852.

2 Leonard Pitt, *The Decline of the Californios*, 128-9. (Berkeley: University of

California Press, [1998]

3 Guinn, J.M. *A History of California* (Los Angeles: Historical Record Company, 1915),  
359-60.

Photo courtesy of Los Angeles Public Library.

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