

In Good Old Days, Santa Cruz Had Three Horse Race Tracks

Sport of Kings Provided SC's Entertainment

By Margaret Koch
Early Santa Cruzans had their bear and bull fights. And from this gory spectacle they went to the other extreme and also enjoyed the sport of kings.

Back in the early days, before movies and TV, Californians had to amuse themselves the best they could. Once in awhile a brave soul would capture a bear — alive — in the Santa Cruz mountains, bring it into town and stage a wild bear and bull contest over near Branciforte creek. But bears were not easy to come by. Bear catchers were scarce too.

And everybody had horses: trained and beautiful purebreds to show at fairs; sleek, fast ones to run in races, and Dobbins to pull the family plow.

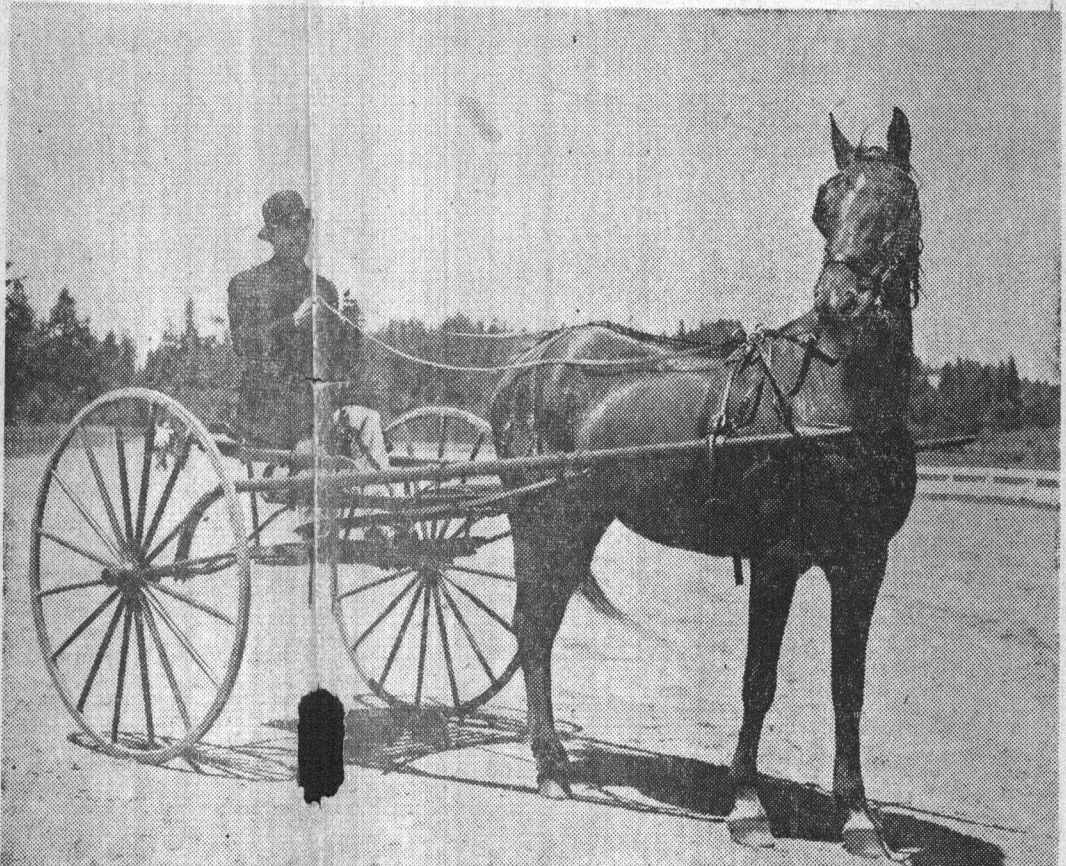
Horses were as much a part of everyday family life then as the faithful station wagon is today. The sport of kings was within the reach of almost everyone. And horse racing became big business in the Santa Cruz area — big enough to warrant the existence of three race tracks at various times during the past 200 years.

All three race courses are gone today. The oldest, the mile-long straight track is now Branciforte avenue. When you drive over it you are traveling where "early Californios" once galloped their fine horses neck to neck to the shouts and screams of excited Sunday crowds.

There are a few — very few — people around today who saw the race track in action. Fred Wagner, Tom Majors and his brother Joe Majors, maybe several more. You can count them on the fingers of one hand. Wagner, his wife, Grace McCall Wagner, and his sister-in-law, Carrie Miller Wagner, were kind enough to dig back into their memories of the three tracks.

One of the last horse races on

Old-Time 'Road Cart'



Here Comes the Winner



An old-time "road cart" used in trotting races years ago is shown by Art Myers of Watsonville. Note how high the driver sits and the size of the wheels in comparison to today's low rigs. The road cart is on display at a recent horse show at Graham Hill show grounds sponsored by the Santa Cruz Horsemen's association.

COIN EXHIBIT

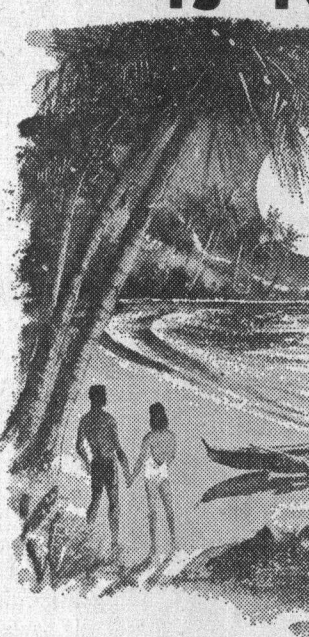
Rare coins will be exhibited at the Santa Cruz Coin club open house meeting tomorrow at 8 p.m. at Hackley hall. A 30-minute film explaining the nation's mint at Denver will be shown and refreshments will be served. Hackley hall is located at 513 Center street.

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Nick Arnet comes in a winner at Graham Hill grounds in a race staged there several years back. Members of the Santa Cruz Horsemen's association still gather for races and horse

fairs at Graham Hill show grounds. They are staging a fair there today from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. The public is invited and there is no admission charge.

the Branciforte track was staged in 1905 at Thanksgiving time and Wagner (who lost a \$35-dollar wager) remembers it well.

"Leo Kaplatzi and Al Pryor were supposed to race their mares," he recalled. "Pryor got John Ferguson — an old jockey who knew all the tricks — to ride his little black mare and of course she won the race."

Wagner's wife noted that her father had a fast mare named "Black Beauty" which he raced at the Branciforte track before she was born.

The track was laid out in 1796 or 1797 by a Spanish engineer named Cordova. Racing was considered a family entertainment in those days which preceded the day of the professional horse race circuit.

The first oval track in this area was constructed out in the area of Swift street and Fair avenue, behind West Cliff drive. For harness racing, it was in use for about ten years during the 1880s and was first known as Ocean View track, then later as the Bay View Trotting track.

Wagner's sister-in-law, Mrs. Robert Wagner, was a very

small girl in 1884, but she remembers a wild buggy ride around the track which was enclosed with a high board fence and a row of eucalyptus trees.

"My aunt, who was visiting from Stockton, drove her buggy out there to exercise her horse on the track," she reminisced. "My Grandmother and I were passengers. The horse, a spirited pacer — got going and the next thing I knew I was picking myself out of the dust."

The animal had veered too sharply while turning, the light buggy had tipped over and the grandmother ended up with a broken arm. Horse handlers from the string of stalls near the track entrance rushed out and got hold of the frightened animal while the women picked themselves up.

Carrie also witnessed an unusual race at the track when a man was pitted against a horse. The horse ran around the track twice to the man's one trip and was judged the winner by a slim margin.

Often competing at the track were two prominent Santa Cruzans, Tom Weeks and John Soper, who both bred and raised fine trotting horses. Sulkeys, known

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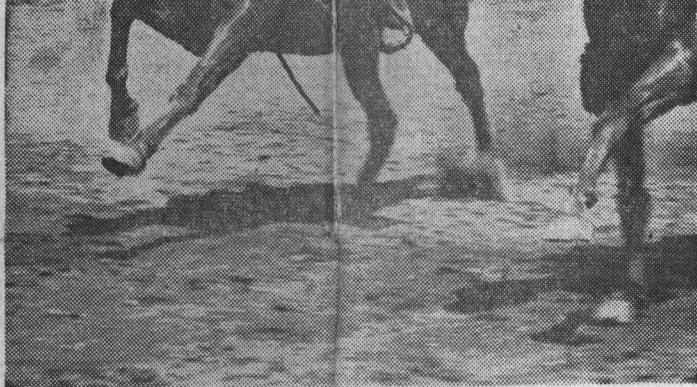
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Santa Cruz was "on the racing circuit" in those days and was visited regularly by professionals who made their living at racing. A hotel which stood near the track on Fair avenue for many years was later moved to the corner of Rigg and Weeks street where it is in use today as a residence.

The third race track, an oval course located near what is Opal Cliffs today, was in operation from about 1910 to 1915, according to Wagner. It had adjoining barns and bleachers and was named after the nearby railroad freight station of Opal Cliffs where tanbark from Sequel canyon was loaded for shipment.

And it was at the Opal Cliffs track that the old-time racing jockey, John "Doc" Ferguson, got his final wish. A man who loved fine horses and the thrill of the race, he had often told Wagner and other friends that when he died he hoped he would be driving a fast-running horse.

"I was there the day he got his wish at the finish wire," Wagner said solemnly.

NEW TWOSOME

Los Angeles (AP)—New twosome being seen around town: Kay Gable, widow of Clark Gable, and Robert W. Prescott, president of the Flying Tiger cargo air line.

Gable died Nov. 16, 1960. Prescott has been married and divorced.

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