

The Heydays of the Dixon Horse Races

By Antonio Duran – circa 1936

The best race horses in this part of the country were owned by Fidel Martinez and Charles Klassen. J.P. Lujan, Jose Romero and Perfecto Sanchez were owners of native horses which also took part in the races. The horse races offered the community of Dixon one of the few amusements around—gambling was a sideline.

Horse racing came about after the opening of the Copper and Harding Mines. People from the surrounding mountain villages would come to work at the mines and attended the races as a pastime. Perfecto Sanchez had a small pony that he used in trapping and J.P. Lujan had a pony his hired boy used to round up the cattle. Manuel Fernandez and Perfecto Sanchez would race these ponies from the top of the Dixon hill to see which one was fastest. Perfecto and his friends challenged J.P. Lujan to a race against his horse, so Mr. Lujan inquired from his hired boy, Manuel, how the two horses compared. Manuel said his horse (Coneja) always came in first, that is, about ninety percent of the time.

After some dickering among Perfecto's friends and J.P. Lujan, they decided to hold a race. J.P. was a wizard when it came to horses and gambling, so he and his friends made some small bets—about one hundred dollars. He hired Augustine Fernandez to be his jockey. Perfecto jockeyed his own horse. The date for the big race was set. Meanwhile there were great preparations being made for the races, grooming the horses, feeding them well and racing them everyday. During this time the community was astir, making bets in anticipation of the big race. Mr. Lujan and his friends were making very small bets.

The entire community turned out for the race on the north side of Dixon. Enthusiasm was high. Eloise Duran approached me and I made a bet with her – a chicken (although I did not have any chickens). The horse I bet on came out in first place so I went to Eloisa's house after the race and picked up the chicken (before I arrived Eloise had told her kids to give me an old hen that did not have any feathers). On the way home I had to wrestle with my conscience as to whether I should turn the poor old hen loose or take it home. Finally I built up enough courage and took the poor old hen home. When I got home Mrs. Lucero, my landlady asked where I had picked up the poor old hen, so I told her the story in detail. I fed the old hen just as I fed the rest of the landlady's chickens and lo and behold the old hen began to lay an egg every other day, so my landlady offered to buy the featherless old hen, so I sold it to her for fifty cents.

This was my first experience with gambling and I don't know what I would have done if I had lost the bet since I did not have any chickens. I did not believe in stealing as Eloise suggested when I asked her where I would get a chicken if I lost the bet. I began to experiment with two strings, naming each for one of the horses in the race. I would light a match to the end of each string and the one that would burn first would be the winning horse, (of course this method did not work out to my advantage all the time).

The people would line up alongside the race track since it was a straight course. The horses took off and in the last fifty yards Perfecto's horse outdistanced J.P. Lujan's horse, so Perfecto and his friends were happy upon winning the race.

Two weeks went by and Perfecto and his friends came to challenge J.P. Lujan to another race. J.P. and his friends made a little larger bet on the second race and Perfecto and his friends bet very heavily since their horse had done so well during the first race. The truth of the matter was that Perfecto and his friends had bet everything they owned – and even went so far as to borrow money. My landlord, Mr. Lucero, loaned them money even though he himself did not believe in gambling. People would bring co-signers and other collateral in order to get the money. They would appear at the door at all hours of the day and night. Mr. Lucero would limit his loans to one hundred dollars to each customer.

Even more people attended the second race. Two o'clock Saturday afternoon was the set time. J.P. hired Flavio Griego to ride his horse and Perfecto again rode his own horse. A Mr. Duran was at the races (no relation to me) who sold home remedies --- moonshiners in those days had a tremendous business. The minute of departure arrived with each jockey trying to take advantage of

yards and from there on it was J.P. Lujan's race—so J.P. cleared about one thousand dollars and cleaned out the boys but good. Many people felt very foolish because they bet on horses that were not even race horses. Many of the persons who borrowed money had to pay Mr. Lucero all they borrowed and lost. Since J.P. Lujan owned the only dance hall in town he held a big dance and brought a lot of moonshine and treated all the losers to a night of drinking and dancing. J.P. Lujan passed away December 23, 1937.



Typed from the original by Charlotte Valdez, 2012