

A nostalgic look at Santa's Village

Back when elves used to get paid

By MARIA GAURA
Sentinel staff writer

SCOTTS VALLEY — Gnomes and elves have long been rumored to live in the Santa Cruz Mountains, but few people recall that impersonating an elf was a paying job here from 1957 to 1979.

During those years, hundreds of local teen-agers traded in their jeans and sneakers for green tights, pointy leather shoes and a minimum-wage paycheck. It wasn't bad for a first job — working as an elf at Santa's summer home, the Santa's Village amusement park.

While the concept of Christmas all year round seems quaint today, the park was by no means the most peculiar roadside attraction in Scotts Valley at the time.

Scotts Valley has long had the identity of a place strategically located on the way to somewhere else, and the town has hosted many resorts and parks over the years, including Erlandson's World Famous Tree Circus and the Lost World dinosaur park.

Santa's Village was the brainchild of H. Glenn Holland, a Southern California developer who opened his first winter wonderland in 1955, in the town of Skyforest, near Lake Arrowhead.

Buoyed by the success of his first venture, Holland soon settled on the 150-acre Law Ridge Ranch in north Scotts Valley as the site for his second theme park. Law Ridge Ranch had been a horse-breeding farm owned by pro golfer Marion Hollins, who lived on the property while she designed and built the Pasatiempo Golf Club.

A group of investors, including Glenn Holland and local Realtor Tanner Wilson, paid \$100,000 for the property and arranged a lease with the Santa's Village Corp.

The local business community welcomed the project with open arms, and Holland's Santa's Village Corp. offered 10 percent of the park's stock to local investors at \$45 a pop.

Ground for the Scotts Valley park was broken in August 1956 by Santa Claus wielding a



A host of children gather round to see Santa and "Prancer" the reindeer.

candy-striped shovel. Nine months and some \$400,000 later, Santa's Village opened to enthusiastic crowds on May 30, 1957.

The early years were good for the park, and the corporation prospered. In 1958, another Santa's Village was built near Chicago in Dundee, Ill.

Bruce Prather, owner of The Mystery Spot, took over management of Santa's Village in 1958 after the original manager, Richard Bellack, resigned to manage his other investments.

"At the time I owned and managed the Mystery Spot, and I thought Santa's Village sounded like something different," he said. Prather managed the park for five years, and during his tenure it was run "like Disneyland."

"It was spotless," he said. "There was not a piece of paper on the ground. That was a great attraction to people."

The park was still spotless when 15-year-old Mary Orr took a summer job there in 1969.

"I remember that when it was slow, we'd go out with cans of paint," said Orr, now the art director of a San Francisco

advertising agency. "It was like the Golden Gate Bridge, something always needed painting."

Elves were issued green tights and shorts, and a pair of green leather shoes with bells on the turned up toes. Initially, the outfit felt "totally ridiculous," she said.

"The shoes were obviously pretty expensive when they were new, but so many people had worn them by the time I got there that the soles were paper thin," she said. "My feet were cold a lot."

Elves had to pass various tests to operate different rides in the park, and having a mechanical knack, Orr quickly worked her way up to operating the toboggan and antique car rides. But her career received a brief setback when one of the jalopies rolled over her foot one day, and she was relieved of her car duties.

Despite the drawbacks, working at the park had its moments.

"Children would approach just wide-eyed," Orr said, "and ask me where I slept at night. I'd point to one of the giant mushrooms and say 'under there.'"

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You took on a masquerade role, it was important to maintain the image for the children. You couldn't lose your composure or be rude.

"And some misty mornings you'd be walking down the paths, and it was kind of magical," she said.

But by that time, the business was beginning to lose some of its financial magic.

The original group of landowners had sold the property to developer Noorudin Billawala in 1966, and

Billawala continued leasing the land to the Santa's Village Corp. In 1969, shareholders were notified that the corporation was considering selling the park. In 1977, after the corporation had gone bankrupt, Billawala bought the entire complex for \$650,000.

Putnam Henck, the contractor who built all three Santa's Villages, teamed up with several family members and bought the Skyforest park. Both the Skyforest and the Dundee parks are still in operation.

According to Henck, the Scotts

Valley park suffered from competition with the beaches and the Boardwalk, and the peak months of November and December could be totally wiped out by rainy weather.

"It was just too bad about (the Scotts Valley park)," Henck said. "It was a beautiful park. If you tried to build it today, it would cost \$2.5 million."

Billawala considered revamping it into a huge Knotts Berry Farm-type park, with a hotel, new rides and a shopping center. When that plan was rejected by the city, Billawala tried a more "natural" look, changing the park's name to "The Village." Arts and crafts fairs were held on the property in 1978, but by 1979 the park's gates were closed for good.

Billawala claims that the city sealed the park's fate when they changed the zoning in the undeveloped portion of his property from commercial to residential, and refused to let him expand the park.

But others say that Billawala was a speculator who simply had too many deals rolling at once, and didn't spend the time or money to maintain the park.

In 1984, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers foreclosed on the property after Billawala defaulted on a \$3.77-million loan. The land was sold to Dividend Development Co. in 1985.

Dividend now plans to build an auto plaza on 11 acres of the land, and build single-family homes on the rest.



Santa (Carl Hansen) cuts a cake for an unusual crowd.



Once-happy decorations that made Santa's Village an exciting place for young people to be now lie fallen and broken.

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