

Decades of seaside thrills and promoters



Fun by the sea at the Boardwalk early casino, 1911.

Boardwalk 6-22-89

Octagon exhibition twirls back along the Boardwalk

By MARYBETH VARCADOS
Sentinel features editor

EVERY WEEKEND they arrive in droves, to dip their toes in the saltwater and breathe the salubrious sea breezes.

It was always like that. People from the hot valleys coming over the mountains for a breath of fresh air.

Then in 1907 came the Boardwalk, and they began to come for the excitement, the thrills.

In Santa Cruz, there was never a dull moment.

Hold on, that's the title of the new Octagon Museum exhibit.

And an apt title it is.

From 1904, when the first casino was built, through years when the Suntan Special pulled in Sunday mornings at 11, the excitement swelled at the seaside. The passenger train is long gone, but thrills of yesteryear return at the Octagon. The minute you walk into this new exhibit, with its honky-tonk music and lights, your imagination swirls and twirls back through a history of promoting the county.

It's never dull, and neither are the two creative spirits behind this long-overdue exhibit, Charles Prentiss and Nikki Silva of Santa Cruz City Museum.

Prentiss' skill with color and design has produced an amazing reproduction of the Boardwalk architecture, complete with intricately detailed wallpaper segments that reflect the opulent tastes of its earliest designers.

Silva, Prentiss' wife and the

realized how significant it is."

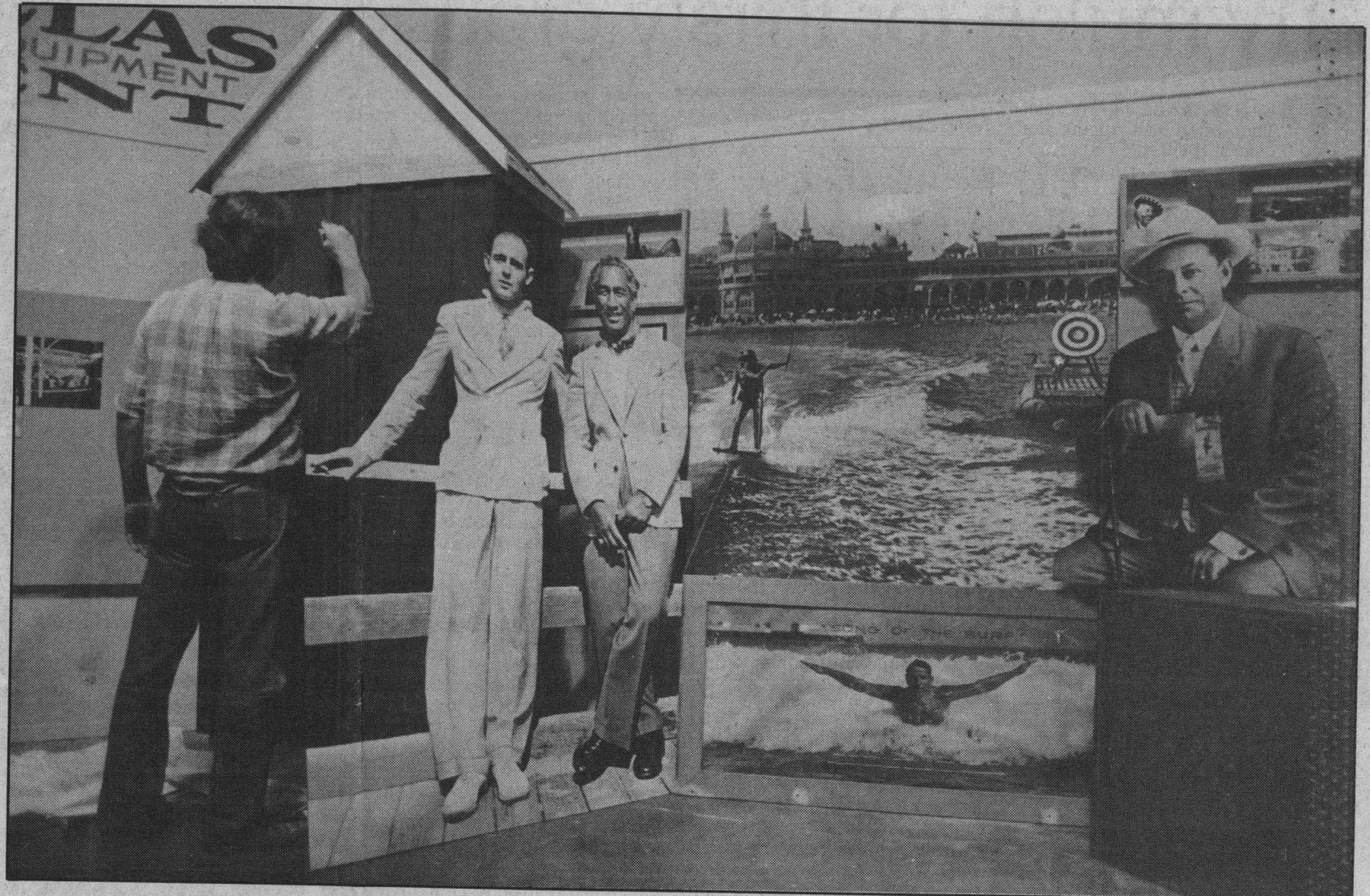
Silva compiled stories and memorabilia, working closely with the Seaside Company's new official historian, Mickey Ryan. Meanwhile, Prentiss researched the casino's architectural angles and constructed a replica of a dome; inside this, visitors can manipulate antique forerunners of today's video games. Outside, they can stroll Boardwalk-style and immerse themselves in a history of fun and promotion.

The exhibit is organized decade-by-decade, starting with Mayor Fred Swanton building it in 1904, and rebuilding it in an amazing few months of 1906, despite a demand for building supplies after the Big Earthquake in San Francisco.

In early years, there were beach houses along the seaside. But Swanton was determined to transform Santa Cruz into an Atlantic City of the West, a Coney Island of the Monterey Bay.

It even included a roller rink; one the first skaters was a chap named Harley Davidson, better remembered for his motorcycles.

Much of the history comes from archives kept by Boardwalk promoter and historian Skip Littlefield, who died a few years ago, leaving his written history incomplete. Littlefield devoted his life to the Boardwalk, his later years to writing about it. But when his files were opened, it was learned he'd never gotten further than 1915 in his historical writing.



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Can you identify designer Charles Prentiss as he works among lifesize photo cut-outs of Boardwalk personages?

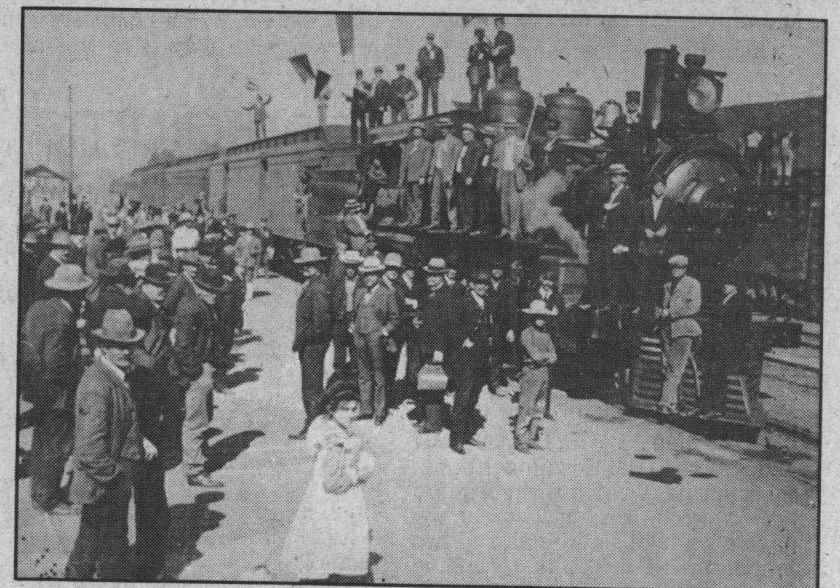
stories are plenty. In fact, Silva finally had to bring local involvement in the exhibit to a close. She couldn't handle any more contributions. "It keeps getting more bizarre and complex — just like the Boardwalk," she says.

As Ed Penniman was designing posters and invitations for "Never a Dull Moment," he remembered that his grandfather, T.F. Costella, a cement contractor, poured the footings and foundation for the Big Dipper in 1924. Penniman worked with architect Bill Bagnall on architectural design during the Boardwalk renovation in 1973.

And Esther Rice shared photographs of herself when she was a diver at The Plunge, the Boardwalk's huge saltwater swimming pool. The plunge was the town's only swimming in her day, she said. Everyone learned to swim there. It was an integral part of town life.

created in 1911, one of the six remaining Charles I.D. Looff carousels in the U.S. The Giant Dipper, designed in 1924 by Looff's son, Arthur. The Boardwalk, one of the 10 top amusement centers in the U.S., attracts some 3 million visitors a year.

"Never a Dull Moment: The History of the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk" will open officially with a party Friday from 4:30 to 7 p.m. "Dance in the Streets," a free, outside party on Cooper Street, will include Big Band sounds by the 16-piece band Esquire, and dancing the fox trot with dance instructor Meryl Selman. Historian Sandy Lydon will talk on the role of tourism in the county and the colorful promoters behind it. Museum hours are noon to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday. Admission is free, but donations are appreciated. For more information, call 425-2540.



Promoter Fred Swanton's 'boomer train' traveled the state.

city Museum.
 Prentiss' skill with color and design has produced an amazing reproduction of the Boardwalk architecture, complete with intricately detailed wallpaper segments that reflect the opulent tastes of its earliest designers.

Silva, Prentiss' wife and the guest curator, concentrated on the history. "I have always wanted to do this exhibit," she says, adding that the opportunity came at rather an inopportune time, January. She had just given birth. "But I couldn't say no. I love the Boardwalk, I always have. And I love it more now, knowing all the stories."

Part of the fun, she adds, is fitting the Boardwalk's history in with the history of the area. "I never realized the role the Boardwalk played," she says. "I always thought of it as a wonderful place that struck a nostalgic chord in me, but never

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At one point in the exhibit, Littlefield is shown in lifesize photograph cut-outs with Duke Kahanamoku, an Olympics swimming champion of the '30s who is credited with introducing surfing to Santa Cruz.

Debut of the Seaside Company in the 1920s brought such exciting additions as the Miss California Pageant and construction of the Big Dipper.

Which raises discussion of today's citizenry and their involvement with the Boardwalk. The

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Jim Krueger loaned a metal rabbit from a shooting gallery.

Francis Carney loaned souvenirs, with promotional messages, like, "I'm sowing my wild oats in Santa Cruz." And he loaned a photo-print from a 1906 promotion, done before the casino was rebuilt after the fire. "Swanton was determined to show people that everything's all right," observes Silva. So he had a picture of the original casino superimposed over an aerial photo of the seaside. Only trouble is, the casino is put in backwards.

Promoting Santa Cruz took many forms, some spectacular. Like Swanton's "Boomer" train. The town's businessmen would board the train and, like partying fraternity boys, take off to tour the state, in company of two brass bands. They'd stop at towns up and down the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys and, with plenty of hoopla, spreading the gospel of our Atlantic City West.

One promoter, M.C. Hall, now in his 90s and still a Santa Cruz resident, promoted choice areas throughout the county while drawing people to the Boardwalk. It was a treasure hunt, with clues hidden in, say, Aptos. They led to \$10,000 in prizes buried in sands by the casino. He even arranged for a pirate ship to visit the bay for the occasion.

Every Boardwalk era fascinates. The lean '40s, when Big Band dances kept hard times at bay. Years when the Southern Pacific's Suntan Special came into town. The fun house. The carousel

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The Bayshore Limited Steam Railway, 1907, transported people from the Pleasure Pier to the end of the Boardwalk.