

Santa Cruz' Boardwalk thriving in its 75th year

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THE LAST of the Coney Island-style seaside amusement parks that once dotted the West Coast has survived 75 years of economic hard times, coastal storms and fickle public taste.

The Santa Cruz Cocoanut Grove ballroom and boardwalk, built in 1907 during a gracious Victorian era of seaside bathhouses for "healthful ocean dips," has outlived a dozen amusement parks from San Diego, Venice and Santa Monica to San Francisco's Playland and up to Oregon and Seattle.

The Giant Dipper roller coaster, its white wood skeleton arching above the city skyline, has filled the sea air since 1924 with the squeals of delighted riders. The smell of hot dogs and cotton candy floats in the air along with the revived harmonies of the bygone age of big bands.

All the seaside parks but Santa Cruz' have fallen victim to a public constantly looking for bigger and bigger thrills and to competition from "theme parks" with their super-rides. Skyrocketing coastal land prices and the demise of big bands that once drew record crowds have also been blamed for the death of many of the parks. Ironically, the big bands have staged a revival, and they have proven to be a big draw at the Cocoanut Grove.

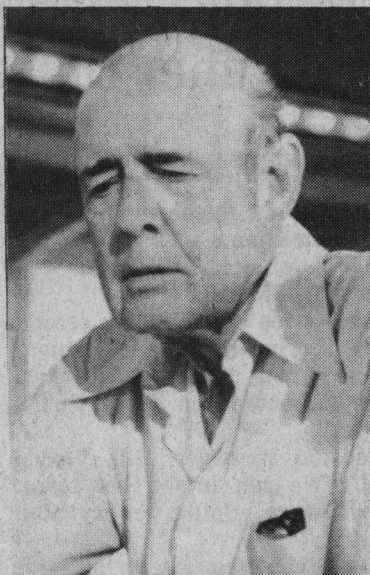
But Santa Cruz has thrived; in fact, the family-run enterprise has just spent \$10 million to modernize and improve the rides, renovate the Cocoanut Grove and restore the park to Victorian splendor for its 75th anniversary. An estimated 1.5 million to 2 million visitors stroll along the wooden boardwalk each year.

In a back office, just off the velvet-wallpapered grand ballroom of the Grove, Warren "Skip" Littlefield, the resort's historian, described his experiences since 1927 when he began watching the year-to-year evolution of the boardwalk.

Littlefield was the first lifeguard hired by the Boardwalk company in 1927.

"I had just graduated from Stanford," he said. "I was also the Pacific Coast swimming champion at the time and there had been a few drownings on the beach that year. The company wanted to give people a sense of security so I was elected," Littlefield said.

The walls of Littlefield's office are covered with the mementos and photos of famous visitors from



Skip Littlefield

the past, such as Hawaiian Olympic swimming star Duke Kahanamoku, who visited the boardwalk in the 1930s. He introduced surfing to the West Coast, Littlefield said.

"He astounded and flabbergasted the world with his (swimming) speed," he said. "The Duke had surfboards made out of redwood and had the boys here taking it up before they ever heard of surfing in Southern California."

During the heyday of the Grove from 1935 until the early 1950s, audiences swayed to the rhythms of Artie Shaw, Benny Goodman, Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey and Lionel Hampton.

The pinnacle was the March 1941 concert by Kay Kyser and his "Kollege of Musical Knowledge," which drew the Grove's record crowd of 3,894 people.

ORIGINALLY THE Grove played to formal balls with military bands, Littlefield said. Later that gave way to jazz, and in 1924 the Isham Jones Jazz Band played for the first Miss California Coronation Ball in the Grove.

Between 1932 and 1949, thousands of San Francisco Bay Area citizens flocked to the resort 80 miles to the south on the Southern Pacific railroad's "Suntan Special." The trains stopped outside the front gate of the boardwalk across the street from the 300-room Casa Del Rey hotel, which is now a residence hotel for the elderly.

Under the guidance of Littlefield, water shows became popular in a heated salt-water pool known as The Plunge. Trapeze artists, water ballet performers and high divers worked in choreographed shows that included a 70-foot dive through a hole cut in the rafters of the 50-foot-high ceiling

of The Plunge into a mere 8 feet of water.

The daredevil stunts were ordered stopped by the city in 1942 due to the danger, Littlefield said.

But the Grove and boardwalk have had to overcome catastrophes as well as enjoying the good times. For two weeks in 1925 torrential rains and massive high tides pounded the ornate pillars of the beachfront Cocoanut Grove and boardwalk promenade.

"That kind of thing happened just about every 10 years, but 1925 was the worst," said Littlefield.

During World War II the fear of Japanese submarines off the California coast forced a blackout that required owners to close the boardwalk each night. But soon canvas curtains were strung along the walks, and lower lights allowed the resort to reopen.

There were years of decline and disrepair through the 1960s when there was little money invested for upkeep. The Grove was closed to public dances and band music, catering instead to private groups, because it could not accommodate the massive rock music crowds.

The antique carousel horses had become so worn it cost nearly \$1,800 per horse to meticulously restore the hand-carved animals, brought in 1911 by Danish wood-carver Charles Loof, said boardwalk marketing director Marq Lipton.

"Most people don't realize how valuable they are," said Lipton. "Each is worth \$4,000 to \$10,000," he said.

Then there is the systematic replacement of wood framing on the park's most popular ride — the half-mile-long Giant Dipper roller coaster, built in 1924. The Giant Dipper boasts a 55 mph "white knuckle" drop of 70 feet over the first hill.

Although the Giant Dipper is not the biggest, among roller coaster buffs it is rated one of the best — among the top 10 roller coasters in the world, according to public relations director Glenn LaFrank.

Along with the spectacular ride, the boardwalk today consists of a covered arcade with shops and snack stands overlooking an expanse of white beach, 34 other amusement park rides, the refurbished ballroom and a nearby recreational pier reaching seaward across the gentle Pacific surf.

"For seaside amusement parks, the mortality rate has been very high," said LaFrank.

"The Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk is the lone survivor; I think that makes us very special," he said.