

Photo: Santa Cruz Seaside Company

The Mighty Bosco

By Geoffrey Dunn

Santa Cruz's Don Patterson was a local waterfront hero

Like many Santa Cruzans raised here during the first half of the Twentieth Century, my cousins and I learned to swim at the Boardwalk's world-famous Saltwater Plunge, an absolutely glorious venue, ornate in design and filled with a brackish aroma that conjured up memories of a bygone era, the likes of which would never be seen again.

One afternoon, when I was still very young, my mother took me down to the Plunge for a diving exhibition by Don "The Mighty Bosco" Patterson. I can still recall the excitement in the air. It was September of 1961.

"You were oh so small," my mother says, "but your eyes were oh sooooo big."

Bosco was a larger-than-life figure in Santa Cruz. A local superhero, like the Lone Ranger or Zorro or even Superman. By day he was a well-loved pressman at the Santa Cruz Sentinel, but on his own time he was

a muscular, diving daredevil at the Plunge, thrilling visitors from far and wide with his aquatic escapades at the Boardwalk's celebrated Water Carnivals.

A good-sized crowd had gathered as Bosco made his way up to a small platform near the arched ceiling of the Plunge, more than 40 feet high. We all watched in silence. He stood there steadily, then sprang out gracefully over the water, slicing the surface at a perfect slant. We all cheered. Then up he went again, and again. He made his way up one last time, went into a perfect handstand and then, springing from his arms, executed a glorious one-and-a-half gainer.

I can still remember the joy on people's faces.

Little did I know then that this would be the Mighty Bosco's swan song. Though I would see him there at night swims a few times after, that afternoon of the glorious one-and-a-half gainer was to be his last



performance at the Plunge. It was closed following the 1962 season to make way for miniature golf.

Donald Ellsworth Patterson was a product of Santa Cruz, born here in 1907. In 1925 he graduated from Santa Cruz High School, where he was a star on the swim team and was also active in drama.

A little more than two years later, he joined forces with the Boardwalk's ebullient young promoter, Warren "Skip" Littlefield, himself a former Pacific Coast swim champion. During summer days, they served as lifeguards together on the beach. At night, they were stars, with Littlefield providing the promotional engine and 20-year-old Bosco supplying the brawn and charisma.

Dressed up in a variety of costumes and performing comedic routines with his pal Ernie "Stubby" Kiff, the fearless Bosco

soared above the crowds on a trapeze hanging from the rafters, from where he would execute a series of trick dives into the water.

Each year, Bosco—who was also one of Santa Cruz's early surfers and a fixture at Cowell's Beach—was coaxed by Littlefield to go a little higher, a little farther. "Skip used to keep building me up, telling the crowd that next week I would be diving from a higher platform," Bosco recalled. He went from 40 feet, to 50, then to a steel girder in the ceiling, 65 feet high.

The following year, Littlefield cut a whole in the roof of the Plunge and built an even higher platform, 80 feet in the air.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Littlefield would bel-low out over the Plunge's sound system, "cast your eyes into the stratosphere. Through that tiny hole will come a hurtling body..."

And, indeed, down would come Bosco into only nine feet of water.

The crowds went wild. At night, he would don a gym suit doused in gasoline, and just before he dove, he would be set on fire, a blazing ball descending from the heavens. "I climbed up on the roof and looked down through that hole," Bosco recalled years later. "You can't print what I thought."

Bosco completed some 480 fire dives in his fabled career. He was paid \$2.50 per show.

Eventually Littlefield moved the Carnival outside. He had a cable linked to the top of the Casino, from which Bosco would roll down on a trolley carriage and dive into the waters of Monterey Bay right before crashing into the Pleasure Pier. He started with a 150-foot drop. Then 400. Then up to 735 feet.

The act was dubbed the "Slide for Life," with Bosco descending toward the salty brine at a speed of 40 miles per hour—a Death Slide, Littlefield dubbed it—and it

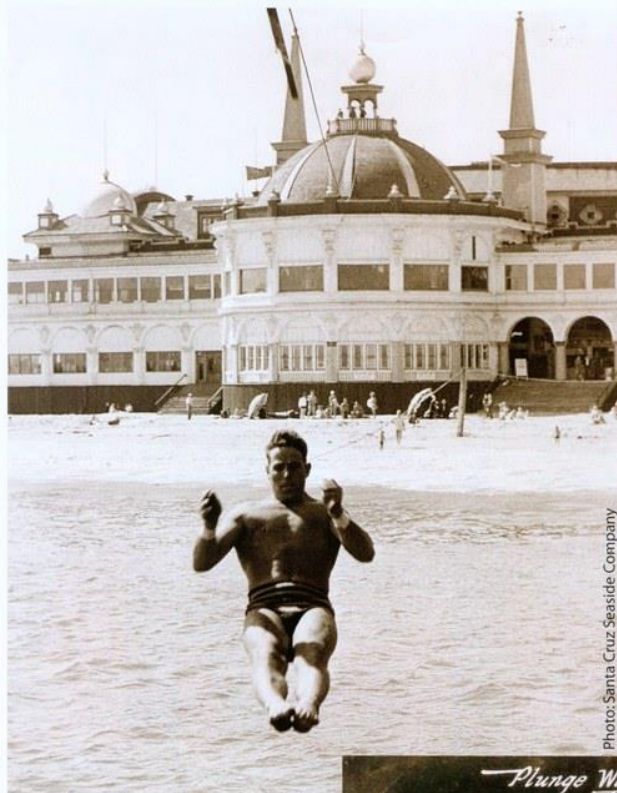


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A cable was linked to the top of the Casino, from which Bosco would roll down on a trolley carriage.

served as the dramatic climax to every Water Carnival performance.

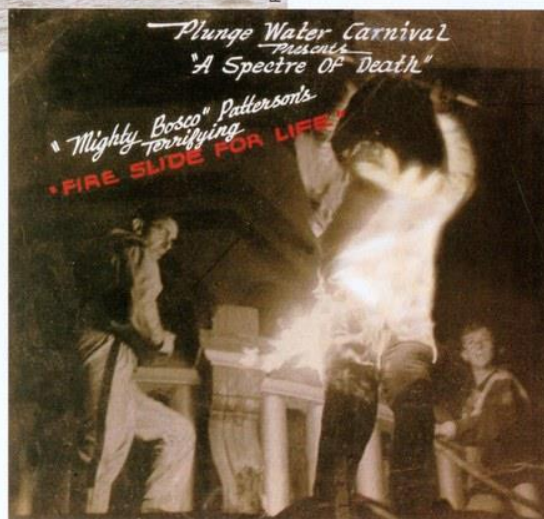
But, of course, that wasn't enough. Littlefield eventually staged nighttime Slides, during which Bosco would also be lit on fire. Then he added a second to the show, 12-year-old Harry Murray, who would slide down with Bosco, gripping his wrists and doing aerial gymnastics in mid-flight, before they both would dive into the bay.

By the end of the Great Depression, Bosco and the Santa Cruz Water Carnival were the biggest aquatic show on the Pacific

Coast, rivaling Billy Rose's famed Aquacade at the 1939 New York World's Fair.

In fact, it got a little too big. In 1940, the California Industrial Accidents Commission demanded that Murray be pulled from the Slide, as it was "too hazardous for minors." By the end of World War II, the show was over.

Bosco continued his work at the Sentinel, retiring in 1974 after nearly 50 years on the presses. He died three years later, from a heart attack, at the age of 70. "In our book," wrote Littlefield in memory of his friend, "he will forever remain a saltwater symbol of a breed of giants that called Santa Cruz home." The Mighty Bosco had taken his final Slide for Life. ♠



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Geoffrey Dunn is the author of *Santa Cruz Is in the Heart*. He would like to thank Kris Reyes and Bonnie Minford of the Santa Cruz Seaside Co. for their assistance.

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