



photo from Skip Littlefield Collection

Thrill-Seekers' Paradise

Santa Cruz Boardwalk Still Earns Accolades

by Jim Detar

The Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk has in recent years become not just a place to while away hot summer days, but also one of the last of a dying breed. Unlike other seaside amusement parks, the Beach Boardwalk has survived, earning accolades from many quarters since it was built in 1907. Most recently it was honored by the National Park Service, which in March of this year placed the Giant Dipper roller coaster and the merry-go-round on its list of Historic Landmarks.

It's of interest that those two rides are now historic monuments, but the burning question remains, 'How many thrills per minute can be packed into a day at the Boardwalk?' To satisfy the thrill-seekers among us there are 19 major rides and five kiddie rides. Admission and a handshake with Popeye, Olive Oyl or Brutus are still free but prices for the rides range from \$1.05 for kiddie rides, to \$1.75 for the Giant Dipper and Logger's Revenge, the two most popular

In the 1860s when sun worshippers first came to the baths at Santa Cruz Beach, there were no rides. But in 1904 an entrepreneur named Fred Swanton laid the groundwork for today's amusement park by building a casino, pleasure pier and tent city. "Never a dull moment," was Swanton's catchphrase. The amusements burned

to the ground in 1906 and were rebuilt with additions in 1907. In recent years, General Manager Ed Hutton estimates that more than two million people have visited the Boardwalk each year.

"In fact, two recent studies indicate attendance figures have always been understated in the past," Hutton said. "Studies indicate annual attendance is 2.8 million, which moves us up from 20th in the country to fourth in attendance."

Each rider has a favorite adrenaline rush, but the most popular is the Giant Dipper roller coaster, whose trains tear around the half-mile track at speeds up to 55 mph. The dizzying 70-foot descent down the main hill, part of a minute and 52 seconds of dips and fan curves, has attracted more than 27 million riders. At night 3,150 incandescent bulbs set up on a chaser light the skeletal structure against the sky. The last wooden roller coaster on a Pacific Coast beach, it has been featured in the *Saturday Evening Post* and the *New York Times* which, in a 1974 article, proclaimed the Santa Cruz ride one of the 10 best in the world.

The merry-go-round, nearly as old as the park, celebrated its 75th anniversary last year. Part of its charm emanates from hand-carved animals created by Danish woodcarver Charles I.D. Looff. The 70 antique carousel animals are valued today at \$4,000 to

\$12,000 each, and were recently restored at a cost of more than \$1,200 per horse. Those who feel lucky and would like to ride a bit of history can try for the steel ring on the merry-go-round.

Another popular ride which recently received a facelift is the 53-year-old Haunted Castle. Renovations were completed this spring at a cost of over \$20,000. In an effort to jazz up the ride, Santa Cruz Seaside Company (which owns the Boardwalk) acquired several computer-controlled "animatronic" figures from the bankrupt Chuck E. Cheese pizza parlor franchising firm. Sculptor and commercial artist Jan Fencil, a Boardwalk employee, created a robot butler to greet riders, as well as ghouls such as Arby, a combination cat-bird and Sir Hamleg, a creature with one leg and a claw who lives in the castle's pantry.

In 1984 a 13,000 square-foot area of the Boardwalk was restructured to support a new ride, Cap'n Jack Flint's Pirate Ship, a gigantic swing in the shape of a boat. Construction costs for the ride totalled \$500,000. And last year the Wave Jammer ride opened in the shadow of the Giant Dipper.

The willingness of the Seaside Company to plow money back into the park for maintenance and new rides is one of the factors which keeps the Boardwalk alive. Unlike similar beach amusement parks which have gone belly up in recent years, such as San Francisco's Playland and amusement parks in San Diego, Venice and Long Beach, the Santa Cruz Boardwalk is still a draw. Although Seaside Company, privately held by the Canfield family, does not release figures on profits and losses, officials say the park is healthy.

By contrast, "Some parks became hangouts and were in disrepair," and were forced to close, said Hutton. There was a brief period in the late 1960s when the Boardwalk started to get a little tacky looking but the Canfields stepped in and stopped the downward slide by upgrading maintenance and security.

Today, maintenance at the amusement park goes beyond the usual spit and shine. A crew of 40 is constantly at work. The Giant Dipper roller coaster trains are regularly checked by X-ray devices for metal fatigue. The trains are completely rebuilt each year and the tracks are inspected daily every other hour for flaws, according to Hutton.

The Cocoon Grove conference center on the Boardwalk was also updated and renovated beginning in 1981 at a cost of \$10 million. These improvements include an innovative energy-saving heating and cooling system which collects and stores waste heat generated by refrigeration units in the kitchens. The "Sun Room," a 6,000 square-foot convention-banquet room, features a retractable glass ceiling.

Charles Canfield, president of the board for Seaside Company, said in a 1984 *San Jose Mercury News* interview that his family has reinvested heavily in the park because of a personal commitment to the area.

"I have a real commitment. I grew up here and started working when I was 16," he said. Canfield succeeded his father, Lawrence, who took over management of the park in 1952. Seaside Company has in recent years expanded by purchasing the historic Casa del Rey retirement hotel across the street and the nearby La Bahia Hotel.

Hutton, who previously managed Frontier Village in San Jose and other amusement parks, told *Monterey Life* that he is committed to the Boardwalk for personal reasons.

"I like this business. People come here to play. Even if they get here grumpy, they park and start to play," he said. "It is an adventure for people to come to us because we don't have some of the big city problems." To ensure that people will not be hassled

by troublemakers, Hutton has beefed up security.

What else does the future hold for the Boardwalk? Hutton said plans include taking out one of the smaller rides and putting in a Disneyland-like teacup ride. In 1963 The Plunge, a gigantic indoor saltwater pool, was filled and is currently being used as a miniature golf course. Hutton thinks the building is underutilized and has been brainstorming creative uses.

"We would like to make the Plunge building multi-level someday, half miniature golf course and half kiddie rides, or put in a 360-degree cinema or 3-D, or something way out, fun and high-tech." One high-tech use being considered is a 40-passenger flight simulator similar to the *Star Wars* model Disneyland just built.

In addition to the rides, the Beach Boardwalk features video and pinball arcades, restaurants, clothing stores and specialty shops. Lifelong Santa Cruz resident Joe Marini holds the record for length of employment at the Boardwalk. Since the age of 10, Marini has been working at the beach for 67 years.

"Dad opened a six-foot candy counter and my sister, Grace, and I waited on customers, selling them peanuts, popcorn and popcorn crispettes. Dad went back to being a barber uptown and we went back to school after Labor Day," Marini said. Shortly after opening the candy counter the Marinis bought a candy store on the Boardwalk and began buying other shops.

"Someone on the Boardwalk sold newspapers and a few bathing suits and we took that over." That was the beginning of Marini's Bikinis, a bathing suit and clothing store, currently located next to Marini's at the Beach candy store. In addition, the family owns Marini's Munchies on the wharf and two T-shirt stands.

"We employ about 180 people at the height of the summer season on two shifts, most of them full-time," Marini said. During summer months the Boardwalk is the largest employer of youths in Santa Cruz County. According to Seaside Company figures, more than 1,000 youths work there summers and approximately 300 work during the off-season.

The Boardwalk rides open a 11 a.m. daily through Labor Day. Through the end of August, Monday and Tuesday nights are 1907 Nights from 5 to 10 p.m. when all rides are 35 cents. Old-time prices are also in effect on a variety of foods and souvenirs. A champagne brunch is served Sundays in the Sun Room from 9:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.



photo by Vester Dick Photography