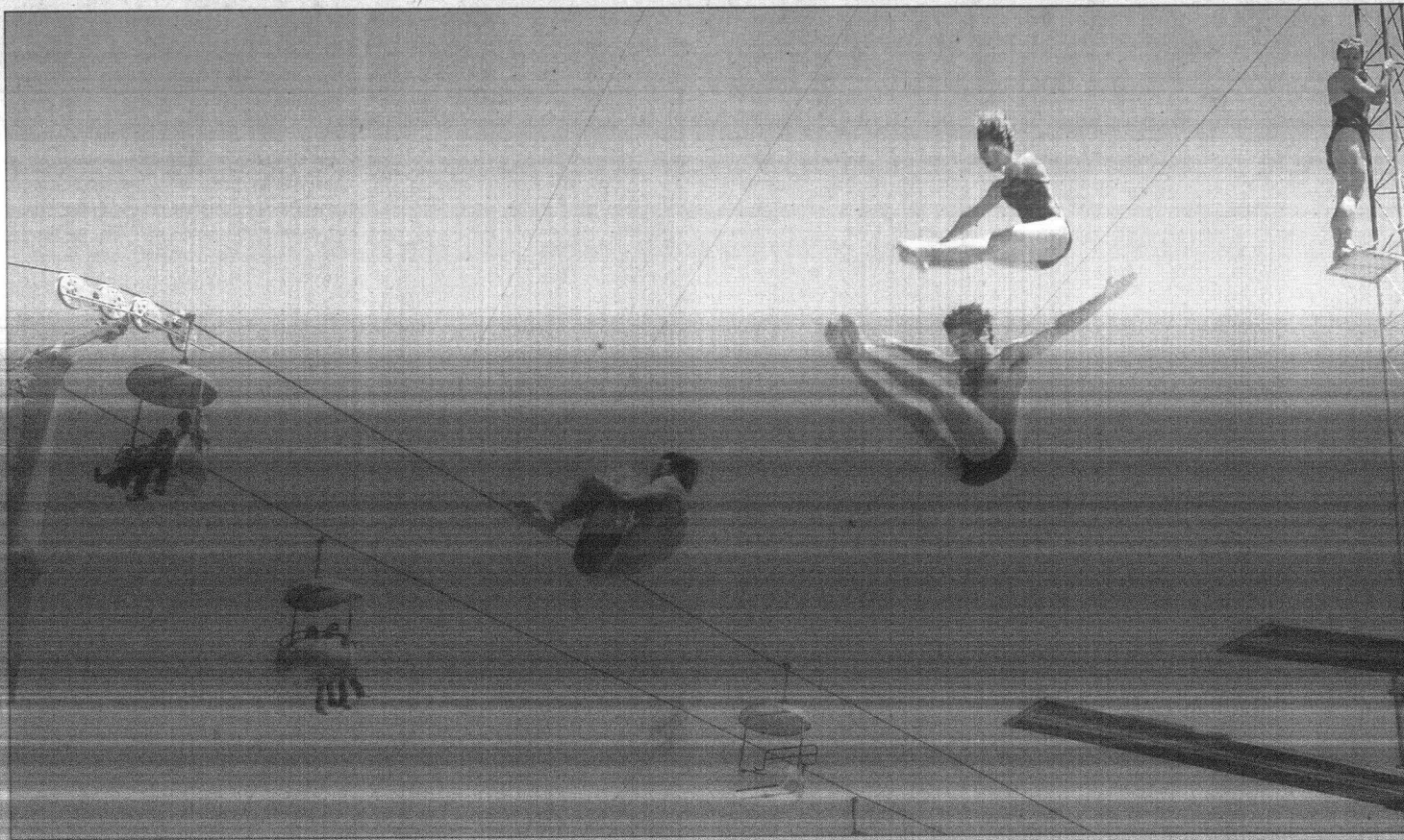


Centennial festivities recall boardwalk of old

Boardwalk

jmm 5-20-07



PATRICK TEHAN — MERCURY NEWS

High divers leap from a tower before plunging into water 85 feet below at the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk's centennial celebration.

SANTA CRUZ SALUTES ICONIC DESTINATION

By Roger Sideman
MediaNews

Carrol Bates started working at a pizza kitchen on the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk in the 1950s.

But now, at 83, Bates was reclining on a beach chair in the sand Saturday, watching the kind of old-fashioned entertainment — high divers plunging from a tower into a pool of water 85 feet below — that she missed over the decades while toiling away at the Santa Cruz amusement park.

"You couldn't work at a better place," Bates said. "You never get grouches, because everyone's here to have fun."

Her attitude runs in the family: Her mother was a cashier, and her two children and three grandchildren all held jobs at the boardwalk.

Saturday's high-dive show was a salute to beach performances of the boardwalk's

past, a throwback to the early days at the most visited spot in Santa Cruz. The boardwalk is celebrating its 100th birthday this year.

The show, which continues with performances today, culminates with a plunge by a costumed diver who lights herself on fire before plunging into 10 feet of water below. The high dive act requires the diver to avoid hitting the bottom after falling at speeds of up to 55 mph, the emcee says, fishing for gasps from the audience.

"That's like driving down the highway," he explained, "and coming to a halt with less than 10 feet to do it."

Visitors have long flocked to the seaside amusement park, which was created in 1907 by local businessman Fred W. Swanton. They went to dance at the casino, dive in the indoor saltwater pool known as

the Plunge and enjoy the beach.

This weekend's Centennial Celebration, with shows and concerts, marks the kickoff of a summer packed with free events, said Kris Reyes, spokesman for the Seaside Co., which owns the boardwalk.

Special events will include the city's first summertime fireworks show since the 1970s, scheduled for June 16, and a screening on the beach of the vampire-flick "The Lost Boys," filmed at the boardwalk 20 years ago.

Home to the famed Giant Dipper roller coaster and other iconic rides such as the Cave Train and Loeff Carousell, the boardwalk has evolved through the decades into a destination that draws an estimated 3 million visitors annually.

An annual pilgrimage to the boardwalk is the closest thing there is to a rite of passage for the 20 or so members of the Olesen family. The family matriarch, who died 35 years ago, vacationed there every year starting in the 1930s, enjoying a cool summertime respite from her raisin farm in Fresno. At 3 months old, her great-great-granddaughter was initiated Saturday, joining relatives who journeyed in from around the country — and from the raisin farm, too, which remains in operation.

"This is the only place my mother ever would come for vacation, so we come to honor her," said Donald Olesen, 90, of Oakland. "This has been going on for 70 years."

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WE WANT BOARDWALK STORIES

What are your favorite memories of time spent at the Santa Cruz Boardwalk? Send them — 100 words or fewer — to boardwalk@mercurynews.com, and we'll include some with a story next week on the anniversary.