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The Boardwalk's Giant Dipper Roller Coaster, unveiled May 17, 1924, has become one of the world's classic amusement park rides and a famous Santa Cruz landmark.

1984: Santa Cruz Boardwalk's Giant Dipper turns 60

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Sentinel is celebrating its 150th year in 2006 by reaching into our archives to republish some of the noteworthy stories out of the past. The following story ran on May 17, 1984. At the time, it had been 60 years since one of Santa Cruz's most famous landmarks—the Giant Dipper—began operation. Skip Littlefield, writer, historian and chronicler of the Santa Cruz waterfront, prepared this look back.

By SKIP LITTLEFIELD
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — Sixty years have witnessed many anniversaries since

this community celebrated a historic heritage-producing May 17, 1924.

Entrepreneur Fred Swanton proclaimed that little Mary Black was chosen to represent this city in the state's first "Miss California Beauty Contest." Then Arthur Loeff unveiled one of the world's classic amusement rides — the Giant Dipper Roller Coaster. Both events focused national attention on the Boardwalk.

Living on Beach Hill today is Mary Black Roberts. Still a seashore survivor is the Giant Dipper. Both are still well and very much alive.

Santa Cruz' first roller coaster was

not the Dipper. Pioneer honors belong to Col. Artemus Forbes, a flashy Oakland promoter who invested \$3,900 in his "California Roller Coaster Tobagon Ride." Location was a vacant lot on Pacific Avenue near Maple Street. Grand opening was June 13, 1886.

Ride height was 24 feet, and length of the "thriller" was 500 feet on a circular track. Ten cents was charged for the 14-second hair raiser. Said the Santa Cruz Sentinel: "The screams of the timid add to the excitement, but almost before a person is aware of it he or she has reached the end of the track."

Col. Forbes' stay was a brief 60 days.

On Aug. 15, 1886, the sheriff served a writ of attachment in the amount of \$140. The luckless owner left for parts unknown.

Twenty-two years later, Henry Hile, business manager of the New Jersey-based L.A. Thompson Scenic Railway Co., watched the marine spectacle afforded by Theodore Roosevelt's Great White Fleet anchored off San Lorenzo Point on May 2, 1908. Hile was impressed by the Santa Cruz Boardwalk potential. A Scenic Railway came into being on the present Dipper

See **DIPPER** on **PAGE A10**

Dipper

Continued from Page A9

location which was opened with due fanfare on July 1, 1908.

A crew of 35 men worked on construction. Trains were made locally using Thompson patents. Hile claimed it was a longer, better and swifter ride than any previous fun railways built by Thompson. They had 60 locations throughout America, Canada and Europe. The only other Scenic Railway in California was at Oakland's Idora Park.

The new ride had its problems. It was designed for the pace of a horse and buggy era. Rider comfort, scenery and fresh air were featured, while speed and thrills were secondary. Annual San Lorenzo River flooding plus winter tides caused high maintenance costs.

L.A. Thompson sold his rights to the Santa Cruz Beach Co. for \$1 on July 1, 1911. Acquired by the newly-formed Santa Cruz Seaside Co. in 1916, the Scenic Railway struggled through stormy financial waters until it was demolished in 1923. The original cost was \$35,000. Ten cents was charged for a ride.

Arthur Loeff put the roar in the Roaring 20s with the engineering and construction of the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk

Giant Dipper in 1924. His name remains as one of the giants of an automotive age attuned to amusement rides.

Loeff was the son of Charles I.D. Loeff, a Danish wood carver who emigrated to New York in 1870. Subsequent history designates him among the elite designers and builders of Merry-Go-Rounds. He fashioned the present Merry-Go-Round at the beach in 1911 — a work that could not be duplicated today.

The younger Loeff secured leasing rights from the Southern Pacific Railway and the Seaside Co. to build his dream monument. He was no novice in roller coaster construction. Attesting to his ability were such devices at the 1915 San Francisco Panama Pacific International Exposition, San Francisco Beach, Spokane, Wash., and later Santa Monica, Venice and Long Beach.

Loeff incorporated his Santa Cruz holdings in 1930. Depression years were discouraging.

Sale of the Giant Dipper to the Seaside Co. in 1935 followed. James R. Williamson, president of the beach concern, pondered over balance sheets already well saturated with red ink.

Unlike Monterey Peninsula points, Santa Cruz was never a plush playground. Beach business sprinted through a short season — Memorial Day to

Labor Day.

Working virtually without funds, but with the inspired intensity of a Salvation Army Officer on skid row, was former mayor, postmaster and Seaside Vice President, Fred R. Howe. He was in charge of publicity during Depression and war years. After the war, America's nostalgia for fun-features of the past brought international recognition to the Dipper. Noteworthy was Jack Fields' center color spread in the July 29, 1961 edition of the Saturday Evening Post, and Robert Cartmell's four-page New York Times illustrated article of June 9, 1974 which proclaimed the Santa Cruz ride one of the 10 finest in the world.

The Associated Press and feature writers from scores of California publications have given added status and applause. On April 30, 1976 Charles Canfield, now Seaside Co. President, welcomed Niki Jensen of San Francisco as the 20 millionth Giant Dipper rider.

Vacationists continue to discover the fun of yesteryears. Like the steam locomotive, the Dipper still reflects the exciting era of Jack Dempsey, Babe Ruth, "Big Bill" Tilden, Duke Kahanamoku, Charles Lindbergh and "Silent Cal" Coolidge.

After 60 years — 30 million riders cannot be wrong.