

The Giant Dipper lights up the evening, with the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf in the foreground, in this view from West Cliff Drive.

SHMUEL THALER/
SENTINEL

Giant Dipper coasting along just fine at 85

Boardwalk

6.9.09



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Giant Dipper riders scream during the roller coaster's initial plunge at the Boardwalk on Monday. The revered ride turns 85 years old this year, and the Seaside Co. is holding a free fireworks show on Saturday to celebrate.

Free fireworks show Saturday commemorates ride's 1924 debut

By **ROGER SIDEMAN**
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SANTA CRUZ — You can label Santa Cruz a surf town, a university town or a liberal town. But to much of the outside world, Santa Cruz is simply the place with the roller coaster.

The Giant Dipper, the crown jewel of the Beach Boardwalk, has been ridden by generations of Californians on hot summer days, and it's perhaps the only

spot in Santa Cruz where it's not uncommon to hear several foreign languages spoken on a given day.

More than just a draw for tourists, the Dipper is a connoisseur's roller coaster, its famous white-and-red track still powered by the same electric motor that was running the day it debuted in the era of bootleggers, Babe Ruth and Charlie Chaplin.

The most twisted, hair-raising

IF YOU GO 2009 FIREWORKS SPECTACULAR

WHAT: A free fireworks show marking 85th anniversary of the Giant Dipper roller coaster. It debuted on May 17, 1924.

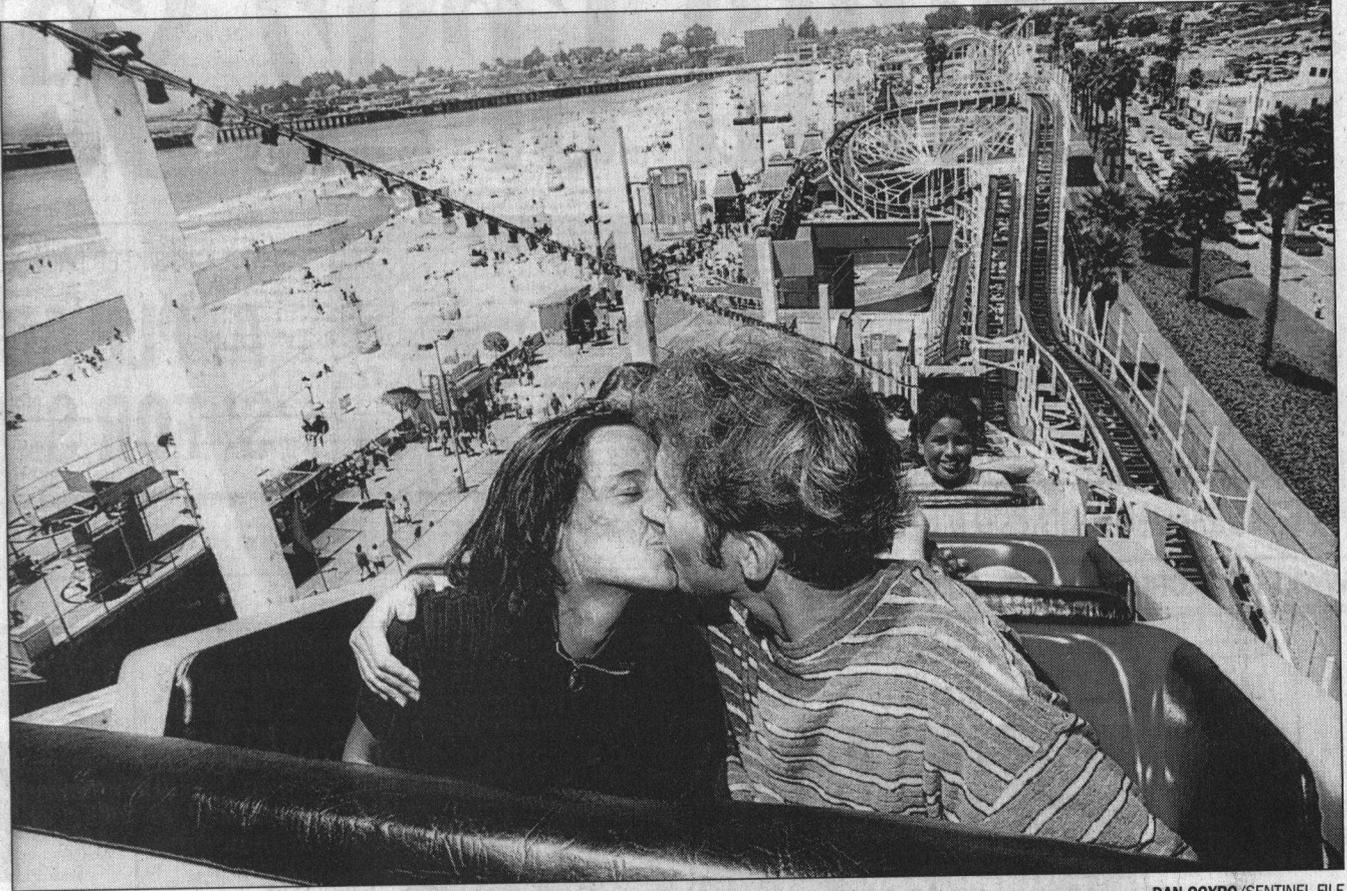
WHERE: Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, Beach Street, Santa Cruz

WHEN: 9 p.m. Saturday
CONTACT: 423-5590,
www.beachboardwalk.com

SEE **DIPPER** ON A2

VIDEO ONLINE:

CHECK OUT SENTINEL VIDEO OF THE GIANT DIPPER ONLINE AT WWW.SANTACRUZSENTINEL.COM



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL FILE

A couple shares a kiss at the top of the first drop on the Giant Dipper.

DIPPER

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and scream-inducing landmark in Santa Cruz turns 85 years old this year, an anniversary that will be commemorated with a fireworks show Saturday night.

AN OLD-SCHOOL THRILL

Inside the Giant Dipper's subterranean wheel room, the motor powers the ride with only half the horsepower of a Volkswagen Beetle, and the thick leather belt connecting it to the coaster is state-of-the-art 1920s technology, still going strong.

It's plenty sufficient, because the Dipper needs power only to lift the trains up the first hill. As is the case with all true roller coasters, gravity does the rest.

The Giant Dipper isn't the fastest coaster around or the scariest. It doesn't flip its riders upside down or spin them in corkscrew patterns like its modern



The Giant Dipper has starred in many movies, including 'The Lost Boys,' 'The Sting II,' 'Dangerous Minds' and 'Dirty Harry: Sudden Impact.' It also has been in television commercials for Mitsubishi, Ford, Levi's, Coors Light, Sony and MTV.

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the fastest coaster around or the scariest. It doesn't flip its riders upside down or spin them in corkscrew patterns like its modern, steel counterparts. But roller coaster lovers wax romantic when talking about the Dipper's wooden structure and the clickety-clack sound it makes as the cars climb up the first 70-foot hill. For true coaster fans, the Giant Dipper will always be one of the best.

"In a world with so many fancy thrills where faster and bigger seems best, it is good that the Giant Dipper still provides a wholesome, old-school thrill," said 31-year-old Ramona Rubin.

In 2002, the Giant Dipper celebrated its 50 millionth rider, a milestone that's something of a misnomer, considering how many people have ridden it more than once.

Look at Gerry Watt, 52, of Sacramento, who has been riding the Dipper for 40 years.

"It's easily one of the best roller coaster rides anywhere on the planet," said Watt, who belongs to American Coasters Enthusiasts, an international group with more than 5,000 members. "There's a magic moment anytime I get to ride up it at sunset or at night with the lights ablaze beneath me on the Boardwalk and the breezes coming off the ocean."

Besides Watt, if anyone's qualified to speak with authority about the Giant Dipper, it's Tom Tutting, who plans to ride it this summer on his 85th birthday. The Santa Cruz resident first rode the Dipper around the beginning of World War II and remembers the mandatory nighttime blackouts when the coaster's flashing lights were shut off during operation in fear it would be an easy target for enemy planes.

Tutting rode it everyday between 1952 and 1969 while working as general manager of the Seaside Co., which runs the Boardwalk — a nice job perk. There's no telling how many times Tutting has ridden the Dipper, but he estimates the number



AT A GLANCE

THE GIANT DIPPER

GRAND OPENING: May 17, 1924

TOP SPEED: 55 mph

TRACK LENGTH: One-half mile

RECORD TIME: 1 minute, 52 seconds

RECORD DAY: 13,729 riders on June 27, 1987

RIDER CAPACITY: 48

STATUS: Ninth oldest roller coaster in the U.S., oldest on the West Coast

SOURCE: Seaside Co.

could easily surpass 1,000.

"It's still a thrill when it drops you into the tunnel and pulls you up the first hill," said Tutting, who has no plans to quit after his birthday. "I still have a few years to go yet."

LOCAL ICON TO HOLLYWOOD BACKDROP

The Giant Dipper debuted on May 17, 1924, instantly becoming a thrill-seeker's must-do and a Santa Cruz icon. The fare: 15 cents. A ride now costs \$4.50.

The oldest operating roller coaster on the West Coast, it belongs to an increasingly rare group of wood-track coasters.

"It's a working antique — like a Model T Ford," said Carl Henn, the Boardwalk's director of maintenance and development.

Local resident Arthur Loeff built it, wanting riders to experience a "combination earthquake, balloon ascension and aero plane drop."

It was constructed in just 47 days at a cost of \$50,000. Even in today's dollars, that's not much

— about \$625,000.

An early first-hand account was published in the Sentinel in 1924: "Believe us or not, there were about three minutes of more thrills packed under our epidermis than we got out of the San Francisco earthquake."

Loeff's love of amusement rides was hereditary. In 1911, four years after the Boardwalk opened, Loeff's father, Charles, delivered the popular merry-go-round with hand-carved horses. Both the Giant Dipper and the antique carousel were designated National Historic Landmarks by the National Park Service in 1987.

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STILL SAFE, DESPITE THE FLYING TEETH

In real life, the Giant

Dipper has never had a serious incident due to mechanical or structural failure. Boardwalk workers walk and inspect the Dipper's tracks every hour while it is operating. Four full-time Boardwalk mechanics check the ride each day and replace portions of the structure and track annually. None of the wood beams are original.

Still, there are mishaps.

The Dipper's jolts and G-forces are so brutal that they once caused a man's glass eye to pop out of its socket, said Henn, park maintenance director.

He and other ride operators recall the many occasions when they have had to retrieve dentures from underneath the coaster.

Henn disputes a popular theory that the train runs faster on warm days because the grease becomes sludgy.

Charles Canfield, president of the Seaside Co., confirms another theory: the back car gives the wildest ride.

As a teenager, Canfield was a Giant Dipper ride operator. At 69, he still rides it and still insists that fellow passengers raise their arms for the first stomach-clenching drop. The coaster is something of a fountain of youth, he said.

"Everyone gets older and changes," he said, "but the screams and the yells, the kids and the excitement, are always the same."