

70 years of ups, downs

The boardwalk's star to celebrate birthday

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The Giant Dipper, among the most prominent landmarks in Santa Cruz if not the best known, is being feted on its 70th birthday.

The half-mile-long wooden roller coaster, for many the major source of thrills and chills at the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, opened for business on May 17, 1924. But the festivities for the ride, the seventh-oldest coaster still running in the United States, begin today and continue Saturday.

Boardwalk officials, who say that more

than 40 million people have ridden the Dipper since it first opened, note that the coaster was built by Arthur Looff, son of the renowned carousel carver, Charles I.D. Looff. The elder Looff, considered one of the masters at his craft, carved the horses on the boardwalk's venerable merry-go-round, which is now 83 years old.

A ride on the Giant Dipper, a classic example of the wooden roller coaster, takes two minutes. The six-car trains reach a top speed of 55 mph, say boardwalk officials — who boast of an "intensive and dedicated" crew of mechanics who keep the Dipper running safely. Crew members actually "walk the tracks" every two hours during operating hours, they say.

As part of the birthday celebration, every 70th coaster rider today and Saturday

will receive a commemorative anniversary poster, a pass good for any boardwalk ride, an ice cream cone and a photo of themselves — probably open-mouthed with excitement — riding the Dipper down one of its plunging dipsy doodles.

Saturday is a big deal for roller-coaster nuts nationwide: The American Coaster Enthusiasts, a hotbed of such fanatics, have proclaimed it International Coaster Day.

A contingent of the group's members will be on hand Saturday to celebrate International Coaster Day and to make plans for next month's convention of the group — which will hold a traveling get-together, journeying from coaster to coaster from San Diego to Northern California.



MERCURY NEWS FILE PHOTOGRAPH

The Dipper has thrilled 40 million riders.