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Fun House Visions



Charles Canfield has dedicated his life to a vision of family fun on the Santa Cruz waterfront.

By Geoffrey Dunn

It's a glorious Monday afternoon in mid-May on the Santa Cruz Boardwalk. Temperatures are rising into the low 90s and the waters of Monterey Bay are sparkling like diamonds on blue velvet across the horizon. Charles L. Canfield, President and CEO of the Santa Cruz Seaside Company, and I both marvel at the large crowds appearing at the Boardwalk on a school day as we stroll along the length of the amusement park's historic promenade—the past, present, and future all melding into a casual conversation that winds up extending for hours.

For a couple of old salts who have spent big chunks of their lives on the Santa Cruz waterfront, we are surprisingly excited about the picture-postcard vistas on this gorgeous spring day. The afternoon is so warm that light refracted off the water has created a mirage in which distant cliffs and small buildings appear to soar upward, giving the appearance of a magical high-rise kingdom across the bay. Closer to shore, a humpback whale is putting on a nautical show with acrobatic jumps and pirouettes. We take it all in like kids.

(Above) The 1911 Loeff Carousel provides a local cowgirl with a nostalgic ride at the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk.

(Right) Charles Canfield enjoys a warm spring day on the "walk."

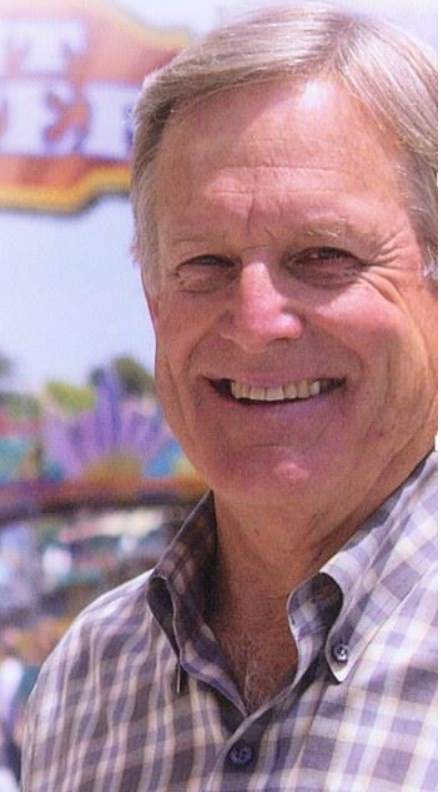




Photo: Geoffrey Dunn Collection

(Above) Until its 1971 closing, a clown's smile welcomed visitors to unlimited merriment in the Boardwalk's Fun House.



Photo: Geoffrey Dunn Collection

(Above) Visitors to the Boardwalk in the early 20th century found it very similar as it appears today. With Fred Swanton's Casino in the background these guests walk by the entrance to the Natatorium or Plunge, a large, heated salt-water swimming pool.

And that's the first thing one notices about Canfield, now in his mid-70s: once he gets away from the pressing demands and formalities of his position, his smile takes on a youthful radiance as he talks about the joys and delights of running the oldest remaining amusement park on the Pacific Coast. After a half-century on the job, he clearly still loves it—passionately, intensely—and he shows no signs of slowing down.

"Hey, it's a cool spot," he says, with a sparkle in his eyes and an adolescent grin. "It's fun and it makes a lot of people happy."

It's as simple as that.

As we move our way along the "walk," as he calls it, he will occasionally stoop to pick up refuse—a stray napkin here, a candy wrapper there. One senses that he takes a deep personal pride in every aspect of the operation, down to the gritty details. He shows me some innovative historical markers he had placed in the sidewalk in front of the Loof Carousel and Giant Dipper—little touches that may go unnoticed by many visitors, but, which for some, make all the difference. "I love those types of details," he says. "It's the little things that can make a visit memorable."

Canfield greets many of the Boardwalk employees we encounter with a nod or friendly hello. It feels genuine and unforced. "Charles' leadership style is to treat his employees like part of the family," says Kris Reyes, the Santa Cruz Seaside Company's Director of General Services & External Relations. "He empowers us to take risks, supports us when we fail, and provides us with the resources necessary to succeed. There is absolutely zero ego with Charles. Everything is about the Boardwalk and the employees and working to make the park better year after year."

When Canfield talks about the Boardwalk's accomplishments—and there have been many since the park celebrated its centennial in 2007, including being named the recipient of the Golden Ticket Award for the Best Seaside Amusement Park in the world—he often directs credit to his staff or uses the plural "we." "It's not about him and never has been," says Reyes. "It's about the team."

As we near the east end of the Boardwalk, overlooking the San Lorenzo River, Canfield points out a series of colorful benches—some with fish on them, others shaped like surfboards—that line the entirety of the Boardwalk's operation. Canfield loves the benches. "They're made and designed by a guy in our Maintenance Department named Whitney Brooks," Canfield says excitedly. "He comes up with the ideas and we just let him do his thing. Aren't they great?"



Charles Canfield's earliest memories of the Boardwalk are of coming to it with his family for Fourth of July fireworks celebrations in the late 1940s, when most of Santa Cruz would partake in the annual festivities, along with thousands of tourists from the sweltering inland valleys of California.

We reminisce about the massive Independence Day crowds of our childhood and the mounting anticipation that always was in the air. "It was really exciting," Canfield recalls. "The whole town would be down here. The only worry was about fog—whether it would dampen the fireworks display. The crowds would really get into it."

Like many kids growing up in Santa Cruz, the wonders of the waterfront were a constant draw. Canfield spent many of his weekends with buddies fishing on the Santa Cruz Wharf and long summer days swimming and sunning on Cowell Beach. The Boardwalk always beckoned.

His most beloved spot, like mine, was the old Fun House, an interior amusement center with a clown-face entrance that featured slick wooden slides, air blasts, distorted mirrors, rotating barrels, and a large spinning wheel called "the Platter," which was Canfield's personal favorite. "You'd get on in the middle and hold onto someone and suddenly you'd be flying through the air together," he laughs. "It was a little dangerous."

We both talked about spending long afternoons inside, especially on rainy days, when a quarter was the all-day price of admission. Later Canfield got to work there, and he started chuckling about the joy of being at the helm of the Fun House's various features. "I really got a kick out of that," he says. "People loved that place."

As with a lot of old-time amusement park rides developed prior to World War II, the wildness and freedom of the Fun House came with more than a few liabilities attached. There were too many injuries, too many risks, and it was closed down in 1971. The same thing happened with the Boardwalk's fabled Saltwater Plunge a decade earlier—it simply cost too much to operate in a litigious universe. "It's part of the world in which we live," Canfield acknowledges. "Times change."

Two major misperceptions about the Canfield family are that it has owned and operated the Boardwalk since its inception more than a century ago, and that Canfield himself was handed the reins of the Boardwalk as something like a family heirloom. Both couldn't be further from the truth.

(Left) Since its creation in 1924, more than 60 million riders have taken the plunge on the Boardwalk's Giant Dipper.

Photo: Bill Lovetoy



Photo: Bill Lovejoy

(Above) A day at the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk provides a fusillade for all the senses. The vivid colors displayed at Marini's Candy Shop confirm the Boardwalk is a very special place.

While waterfront bathhouses and tourist-oriented amusements in Santa Cruz date back to the 1850s, the modern-day Boardwalk was founded by the legendary promoter Fred Swanton in 1903 under the auspices of the elaborately titled Santa Cruz Beach Cottage and Tent City Corporation. Swanton's first casino, built in 1904, burned down two years later, and Swanton raised and borrowed money from around the state to rebuild it, creating a new corporation in 1907 called the Santa Cruz Beach Company. Swanton's dream didn't last long—he went broke after less than a decade and a consortium of directors and investors stripped the Boardwalk away from him, forming the Santa Cruz Seaside Company (SCSC) in its wake.

It was in 1952 that Canfield's father, Laurence Canfield, then heading up a prominent insurance company in Santa Cruz while also serving as a board member on the SCSC, took over the leadership of the Boardwalk. Even though he had no background in running an amusement park—he was in his late 40s at the time—the duties and responsibilities fell on him. "He had a lot of resources invested in the corporation," Canfield smiles. "I guess he didn't want to lose it all."

Charles, then in the sixth grade, recalls going on a nationwide tour of amusement parks with his father to explore the industry. "We flew

(Right) The Coconut Grove, Casino and Boardwalk rise above Santa Cruz's Main Beach and Monterey Bay.

around the country," Canfield remembers with fondness, "visiting parks in Boston, New York, New Jersey, Atlantic City, Chicago, and smaller places, too. We had a lot of fun, but it really was a learning expedition. My dad took lots of notes. Everywhere we went, we learned something."

In the aftermath of World War II, ocean-front amusement parks along the Pacific Coast were in decline. Venerable venues like Playland in San Francisco and Long Beach Pike eventually shut down. They were deteriorating (many companies refused to reinvest in them), the land became too valuable (for high-rise housing and more lucrative commercial ventures) and there was the lure of bigger, more modern destinations (Disneyland and, later, Great America and Six Flags Magic Mountain among them).

Canfield's father realized that the Board-

walk would have to revamp and reinvest in itself in order to survive. "You had to sort of reinvent yourself frequently," Canfield says. "My dad realized that change was something of a constant in the industry. And there had to be reinvestment in the infrastructure. You had to adapt, stay ahead of the curve."

Checking out other amusement parks and discovering new concepts—"I lift ideas from them whenever I can," he laughs—has been a constant theme in Canfield's life ever since. He sees his role as one of generating new ideas and supporting those of his staff. It's a never-ending process, he says, of "reinvesting, rebuilding, and rejuvenating."

Canfield himself grew up on Santa Cruz's Westside—he went to Mission Hill and Santa Cruz High (graduating in 1957)—before heading off to the University of Oregon, where he majored in business. Following a three-year stint in the Navy, he returned to Santa Cruz in the early 1960s, uncertain of his future. Soon enough the Boardwalk bug got hold of him.

In 1965, Canfield independently purchased a handful of the Boardwalk's concessions—Skee Roll, Pokerino, Fascination, and the Balloon Toss—and then added on to his holdings the popular Walking Charlie, Greyhound Races, Milk Bottle, and Cat Rack games. He was a hands-on operator, working all the concessions at various points, always trying to figure ways to make them better and more popular. As he lists his early concessions, we go over a favorite teenage game of mine, Skee Roll, where I worked briefly during the summer of 1969. He asked me a telling detail about how I played the game—whether I "banked" the balls or not (I did)—and we laughed about some of the characters who frequented the walk during that era.

In 1969, as a result of his success with his independent concessions, Canfield was named vice-president of the SCSC, and in 1984,



Photo: Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk

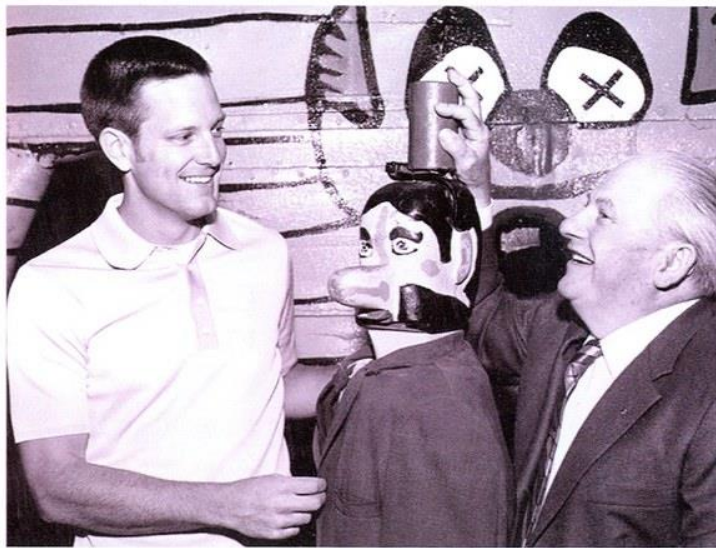


president. This year marks his 50th year since his return to the Boardwalk and his 30th at the helm. He merged his own concessions with the larger company the following decade, and, since then, he has diversified the company's holdings to include a variety of economic activities—from hotels, to the nearby Boardwalk Bowl, to a car dealership, to a partnership with the *Chardonnay* sailing yacht—but his passion remains focused on the Boardwalk.

Canfield still strolls the park's grounds two or three times a week, always dreaming of new attractions and new ways of improving the park experience. In recent years the Boardwalk constructed additional decking adjacent to its

promenade (with solid support from the California Coastal Commission) for picnic tables and ocean-facing benches; it will be adding 1,200 more square feet of decking to its colonnade this year. The space provides a quieter, less-frenetic experience than many of the Boardwalk rides, and it has proved popular with visitors. "It's a great addition," Canfield says of the space. "You can't beat the view."

My late friend Tony Hill, a widely respected civil rights activist and organizational consultant, used to engage in a team-building exercise with the SCSC called "True Colors." He delighted in engaging the staff at the Boardwalk, in part, he told me, because Canfield was far from the norm when it came to personality traits of CEOs.



(above) A young Charles Canfield with concessionaire "Jimmy" Giovanazzo make adjustments to a vintage boardwalk game, Walking Charlie.

(Above) Boardwalk guests go for a thrilling spin on The Beach Boardwalk's Sea Swings.

Photo: Bill Lovejoy

In Hill's psychological scale, Canfield was a "bright orange"—someone who likes adventure and "operating outside the box"—indeed, the precise opposite of typical corporate leaders unwilling to take risks and chances. It explains his continued passion for the Boardwalk's enterprise (and also a good deal of the operation's success) and, perhaps, why he has occasionally bristled at government bureaucracies that try to constrict his vision.

As we near the end of our stroll, Canfield and I duck into the historic Loof Carousel, originally designed in 1911 by Charles I. D. Loof, and today one of the most historically significant merry-go-rounds in the world, featuring 73 hand-carved and ornately colored horses. In 1987, along with the Giant Dipper, it was named a National Historic Landmark. In many respects, the Boardwalk is a living, breathing museum.

Canfield shows me some upgrades he has recently directed inside. In addition to the Loof Carousel's original Ruth & Sohn band organ, Canfield purchased a rare Wurlitzer 165 model that was originally located at San Francisco's Playland as well as a smaller Wurlitzer 146—all three of which alternate in producing the unique musical orchestration gracing the central portion of the Boardwalk's promenade.

It's a nostalgic soundtrack that takes us both back in time.

Canfield and I soak it all in—the sounds, the smells, the sensory delights. I see a young boy that could have been me 50 years ago reaching for a brass ring. I glance over at Canfield and he is beaming. "This place gets into your blood," he says, with one of the band organs crescendoing in the background. "It really does. I think it's in there to stay." ♦

Geoffrey Dunn is the author of *Santa Cruz Is in the Heart* (Capitola Book Company).

Photo: Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk