# By the beautiful sea at the Santa Cruz boardwalk

From a classic carousel to a careening coaster at the 'Coney Island' of the West

By Don Weiss and Phyllis Wachob Weiss

ANDS IN the air, no holding onto the handgrip. The Giant Dipper crests that first hill and plunges down "The Drop," and all belt out a hearty "Eeeeeeehhhhhh!" You've done it, your parents did it, and there's a good chance your grandparents did the same. Thirty-five million shrieking riders have taken the plunge, and the shrieks go on.

More than a century ago, the Bay Area was caught up in a new health fad sweeping the nation: saltwater bathing, right in the sea, most particularly at Santa Cruz.

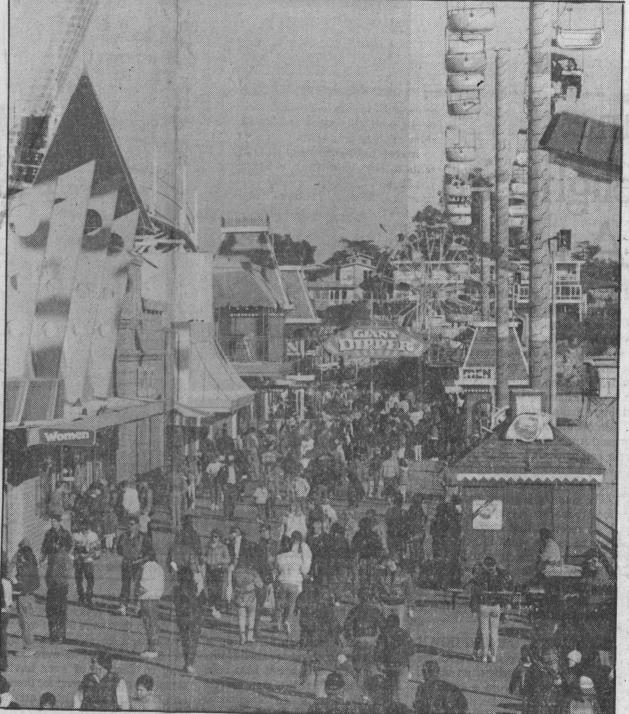
This was not swimming, just wading out in a bizarre costume. holding hands to stay upright in the surf. Once you were soaked to

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the skin and chilled to the bone, it was time to come out, dry off, change into something respectable and have a hearty meal. The more things change . ...

For 30 years people bathed at seaside bathhouses and ate at neighboring restaurants, but not much else happened at Santa Cruz Beach until a genius named Fred Swanton appeared on the scene. He brought many new things to the little resort town of Santa Cruz, including California's first hydroelectric plant and telephone exchange - but nothing he did compared with his decision to build a West Coast Coney Island on the city's mile-long beach. The facility opened in 1904, and it's still there.

7HIPPING around the curves of Highway 17 at 10 miles over the speed limit, just popping over for the day, it is hard for modern-day San Franciscans to appreciate what a big deal a trip to Santa Cruz was at the turn of the century. Most people went for a visit of a week or more and stayed in Swanton's tent village, where the Casa Del Rev Hotel now sits, right across from



The boardwalk at Santa Cruz offers a mix of modern and old-fashioned attractions.



the Santa Cruz boardwalk.

the original Casino, built in 1904.

The first Casino burned down in 1906 but was immediately rebuilt and reopened to the sounds of a gala concert featuring John Philip Sousa's band and the Royal Hawaiian Orchestra.

The music at the Casino has changed over the years. The Big Band Sound was "in" during the '30s, and you can still dance to the likes of Les Brown. In the '60s, the New Christy Minstrels and Sonny and Cher were headliners. Rock from the likes of Joe Sharino (the local favorite) is big these days, though more often it is heard from a bandstand built on stilts over the beach itself.

When the Casino reopened in 1907, a real boardwalk had been added, modeled after Coney Island and featuring many of the same attractions. One of the biggest at-

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## SANTA CRUZ from T-6

tractions of these early days is still high on everybody's list: the Looff Carousel, now declared a National Landmark.

Built by master wood carver Charles I.D. Looff and delivered in 1911, it cost the then extravagant sum of \$18,000. Some of the horses on it, all by Looff and most original with this carousel, are now worth about that much. The music is supplied by a magnificent Ruth Band Organ, built in Germany in 1893.

Tell Overture wore out long ago, but turn-of-the-century songs such as "Elsie From Chelsea" are a pretty good substitute, and there is nothing at the boardwalk that adds more atmosphere than this organ.

When the boardwalk got into full swing in 1908, one of the premier attractions was the L.A. Thompson Scenic Railway. It chugged around some curves and up and down a few moderate hills, but it was like a Victorian grande dame, doomed to be supplanted in the wilder years of the 1920s. In 1924, Looff's son Arthur talked the Santa Cruz Seaside Company (which bought out Swanton in 1915) to replace the railway with one of the biggest and best roller The roll that played the William coaster rides in the world.

The Giant Dipper was built in the spring of 1924 and opened in May to screamingly enthusiastic crowds, possibly including your own sedate grandmother, then a wild teen-age flapper. No doubt she screamed and clutched your grandfather, who was determined not to show his date how scared he was.

It cost \$50,000 to build and 15 cents to ride. Now a ride will run you \$2, and as to cost, well, the last time they painted the Giant Dipper, the Seaside Company shelled out \$80,000.

The ride itself hasn't changed at all from Arthur Looff's original fright machine. After the initial plunge into an inky-black, twisting tunnel, you climb the big hill, drop 70 feet, reaching the legal limit of 55 mph, twist around some curves, run over a few bumps and eventually come to rest, breathless.

We have yet to see anybody come off without a stupid grin on his or her face, even those addicts who will ride three, four or five times running. This is now also a National Landmark, a tribute to our national penchant for scaring ourselves silly.

THE SANTA CRUZ Boardwalk, recently named a State Historical Landmark as the oldest and only seaside amusement park left in California, has remained popular thanks to the variety of things to do there, and an ongoing effort to replace out-of-date, less popular attractions with newer ones.

The giant indoor swimming pool of 1907 is now an entertainment center; the Wild Mouse has disappeared, replaced by the Loggers Revenge. The old penny arcade machines are mostly in the executive offices. A few of them

still sit in garish, mechanical splendor next to their descendants, Ms. Pac Man and the Jet Fighter Sim-

You can still get told how hot a lover you are by how firmly you can squeeze a mechanical hand, but you can also have a computer print your picture on a T-shirt in a couple of minutes. Our favorite pinball machines from our student days have been replaced by Dolly Parton and the Space Shuttle.

The mixture of antique and modern is particularly strong in the

all-important food department. You can still get a perfectly pedestrian hot dog at the boardwalk, as well as peanut brittle, saltwater taffy and cotton candy. But pizza, tacos and nachos - unheard of treats in 1907 - also are available. At nearby restaurants you can fill up on sushi, lobster thermidor, falafel or a "catch of the day" from the local fishing fleet.

Probably the biggest single change from grandma's day at the boardwalk, aside from the prices, is [See SANTA CRUZ, T-8]

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The Looff Carousel, with its ornate carvings, is a National Landmark.

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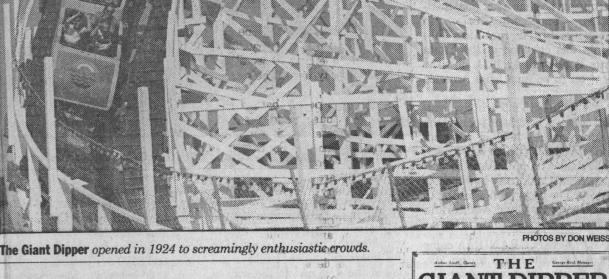
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## By the beautiful sea at Santa Cruz

the clothes people wear. Or don't wear. We have seen people walking along, slurping up ice cream and wearing less than the models in some of the antique peep shows in the arcade.

The big change in swimsuits took place around 1920 with the start of the Flapper Era. Not surprisingly, this was also when beauty contests became a national institution — and Santa Cruz was in the vanguard. The first Miss California was crowned at the Santa Cruz Boardwalk in 1924, and she went on to become Miss America 1925.

There are still a few body beautiful contests held here, such as the tanning contest held in conjunction with the big Miller Lite Beach Volleyball Championship in August. Miss California, however, is history. The pageant moved first to the downtown Civic Auditorium and, more recently, to San Diego.

HEN GRANDMA came to the beach in the '20s, the best way over the Santa Cruz Mountains from the Bay was by rail. The fabled Suntan Special ran from San Francisco with a connection in San Jose to the beach. Daily service ended in 1939, and the last special excursion chugged into the sunset 20 years later.

But not everybody accepted this as final. Norman Clark, owner of the Roaring Camp and Big Trees Narrow Gauge Railroad in Felton,

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The Ruth Band Organ supplies music for the Looff Carousel at the Santa Cruz boardwalk.

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kept the dream alive, and in 1986 a mini Suntan Special was resurrected, running between Felton and the northern edge of Santa Cruz. A vear later the line was extended to the boardwalk. Predictably, the day of the first run all the way to the carousel, the beach was thickly blanketed with fog.

Sun and fog are the two essential elements of a Santa Cruz summer. The nicest days generally start out with a thick blanket of fog, so that the Sunday brunch crowd in the Coconut Grove, as the Casino is now known, is often disappointed that their view out the new oceanfront glass wall looks like the inside of a cotton candy machine. Most days the fog burns off, and the sun and surf crowd takes over the beach by noon.

Santa Cruz has always been a rather plebeian resort. It is possible to spend \$100 per person, per day, but it is not easy. Most visitors come for the day, or at most overnight, have a few snacks, a decent meal or two, take a dozen rides and depart. If they have kids or are sun-worshippers, probably they'll spend some time on the sand, but mostly they'll hang around the boardwalk, ride the rides, eat and have fun. Just like their parents. And their grandparents. Or perhaps their great-grandparents.

It is one of the few things you

can do with such a long history to it that is just as much fun today as when the first child grabbed a brass ring and flung it at the clown's mouth, or when the first teen-ager, on the roller coaster went "Eeeeeehhhhhh!"

The boardwalk is open daily from Memorial Day through Labor Day and weekends year-round. Admission is free. Rides cost up to \$2 each, so the combination ticket books (\$10.95 and \$17.75) and day passes (\$14.50) are good buys. For more information, call the Santa Cruz Seaside Company, (408) 423-5590. For reservations for Sunday Brunch at the Coconut Grove Sun (Fog) Room, call (408) 423-2053.

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