

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
SPECIAL TO THE EXAMINER

HANDS 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 "Eeeeeehhhhhh!" 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.

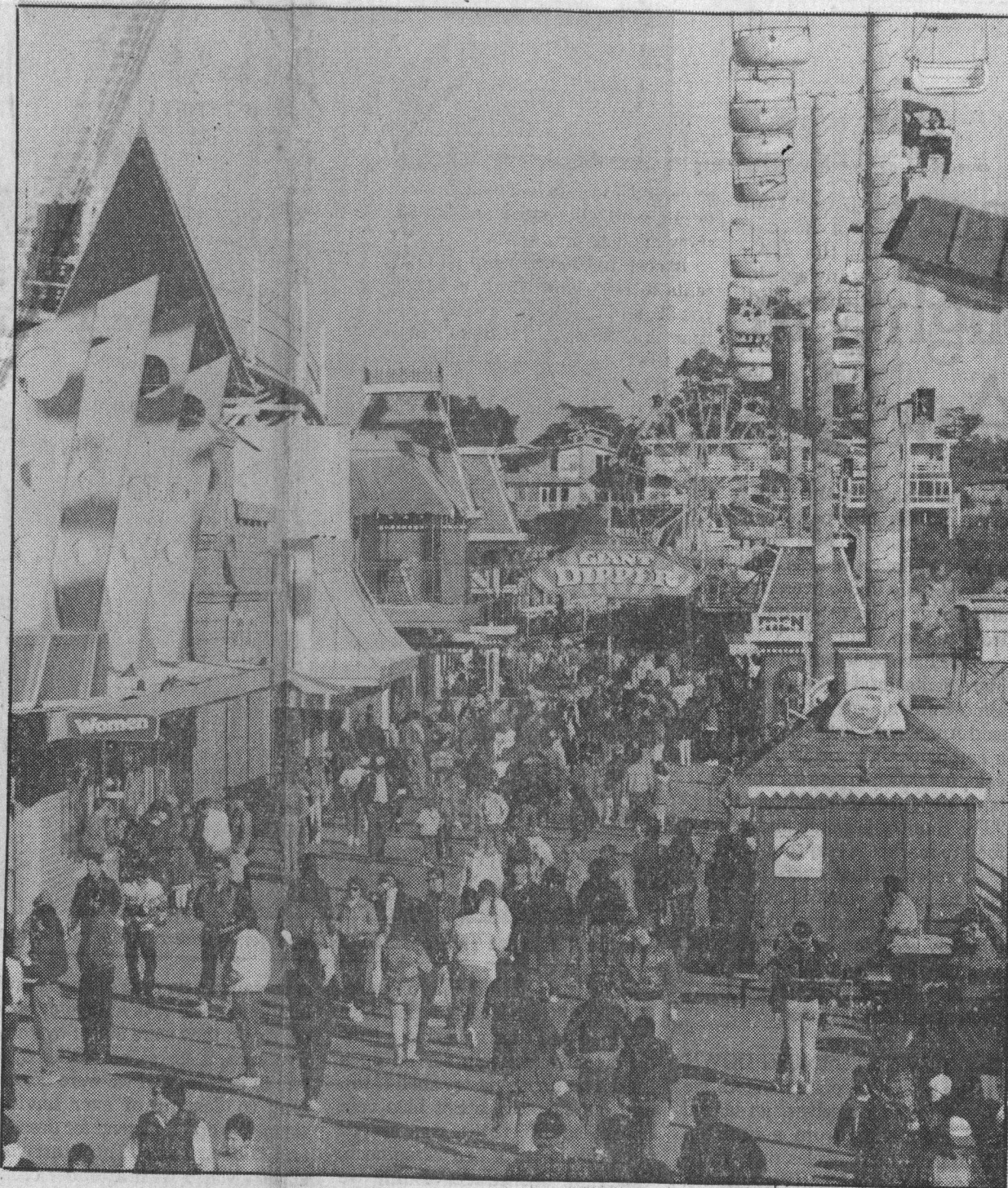
More than a century ago, the Bay Area was caught up in a new health fad sweeping the nation: saltwater bathing, right in the sea, most particularly at Santa Cruz.

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

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.

WHIPPING 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 Rey Hotel now sits, right across from



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

DON WEISS



COURTESY OF SANTA CRUZ SEASIDE COMPANY
A young bather poses for a photo at 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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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.

WHEN 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,



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

PHOTOS BY DON WEISS

kept the dream alive, and in 1986 a mini Suntan Special was resurrected, running between Felton and the northern edge of Santa Cruz. A year 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 ma-

chine. 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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