



On calm summer evenings you can hear the screams a good half-mile away. Ride after ride, the same plunging chromatic scale of mock peril, the exaggerated crescendos repeating themselves with each two-minute foray around the rails. Back when the Giant Dipper made its debut in 1924, riders who needed a bracing shot of something to brave the curves and dives to come had to take nips of moonshine from hip flasks instead of swilling Buds in plain sight as they do now. Ah, but the screams: the screams are cut from the same rabid cloth.

Call it History. Call it an all-too-juicy slice of Americana. On the bright blue windbreakers the employees seem to wear like second skins, it's still called the Boardwalk, properly suggesting the scrubbed Atlantic City carpentry its design was liberally borrowed from and the parasol innocence of the era in which it was born.

With its unfashionably wooden — yet nationally renowned — roller coaster dominating the skyline near the mouth of the San Lorenzo River, this venerable institution of unsubtle amusement just keeps doing what it's done for most of the century: offering an exhaustive aisle of escape where just about every ride travels in a circle and nothing is more commonplace than a scream.

Picture this. It's June 15, 1907 and at the foot of Beach Hill there is a commotion the likes of which few locals have ever seen. Somewhere in the teeming crowd is Fred W. Swanton, a Santa Cruz version of those swaggering, thumbs-under-the-lapels entrepreneurs who were busy turning heads and profits in rollicking turn of the century America. He's talking in capitals again, like always, but this time people are listening. Swanton, you see, is christening his spanking-new Boardwalk casino and plunge, a formidable gesture of architectural and promotional excess which has staked its rococo claim on one of the choicest beachfronts around.

Amidst more flags and banners than a minor war could raise is that most star-striped of conductors, John Philip Sousa, making sure that all the proper anthems and fanfares get played. In Swanton's vest pocket, most likely, is the congratulatory telegram dispatched by President Theodore Roosevelt. There are great bows blooming in the hair of the ladies and many a fine watch-chain slung across gentlemen's midsections. Coney Island, eat your heart out.

No doubt about it — there's enough nostalgia oozing out of this small nub of coastline to allow for endless wallowing. But it would be a mistake to gaze down the Board-

walk's corridor with the same amused and nodding detachment with which we regard bustles, stove-pipe hats and dirigibles. The place has not merely survived the transition of time, but has done so in eminently successful fashion, and the comment it makes on our current tastes and states of affairs is no anachronistic mumbling.

"We're doing something right, that's for sure," Seaside Company publicist Glenn LaFrank concedes cheerfully. Seaside has marshaled the Boardwalk since the early days of the Woodrow Wilson presidency and the company must indeed be doing some things right because the Boardwalk is the only bright bead left of that entire string of beachfront amusement parks which the Pacific Coast once hosted. "Playland in San Francisco: it's gone," says LaFrank, "and Santa Monica's Pike, the parks in San Diego and Venice. We're one-of-a-kind now."

Last year there were roughly two-and-a-half million reasons why Santa Cruz' Boardwalk isn't following its ferris-wheeled cohorts into the grave. That's the unofficial estimated body count for 1981, a recognizable upswing of attendance that LaFrank contends will become the rule rather than the exception. A predictable enough claim, maybe, but it wouldn't do you too well to contradict him. According to recently released figures, tourism is now the most lucrative industry in Santa Cruz County, worth some \$118.9 million in 1980. While the Boardwalk's precise contribution to this pooled total is open to speculation, you can be sure it's no meager drop in the bucket.

### Dave Barber

The Penny Arcade is a misnomer now — since hardly any of its paraphernalia operate on our smallest of denominations — but for that cent you can still bend over an obliquely situated Sultan's Harem peep show machine (that must be older than all but a few of its users) just a few rattles and bleeps away from the latest blue-screened electronic cataclysm. It is perhaps this confusion and mingling of tenses that is the Boardwalk's most seductive quality, if anything redolent with the smell of hot dogs and popcorn and splashed with garish shades of yellow and orange can be thought of as seductive. Archival as it may seem after three quarters of a century, the place is still wooing throngs just like it did before two world wars and thick footprints on the moon made the planet smaller and too smart for its own good.

*Bosco would wait until  
he was seconds away  
from pureeing his bones  
on the pier before falling  
to safety*



Among the many photographs lining the walls of Warren "Skip" Littlefield's Boardwalk office is one in which a much younger Skip is proudly displaying a huge trout apparently just yanked from a mountain stream. You can't blame him. As Boardwalk publicity director for half a century, Little-

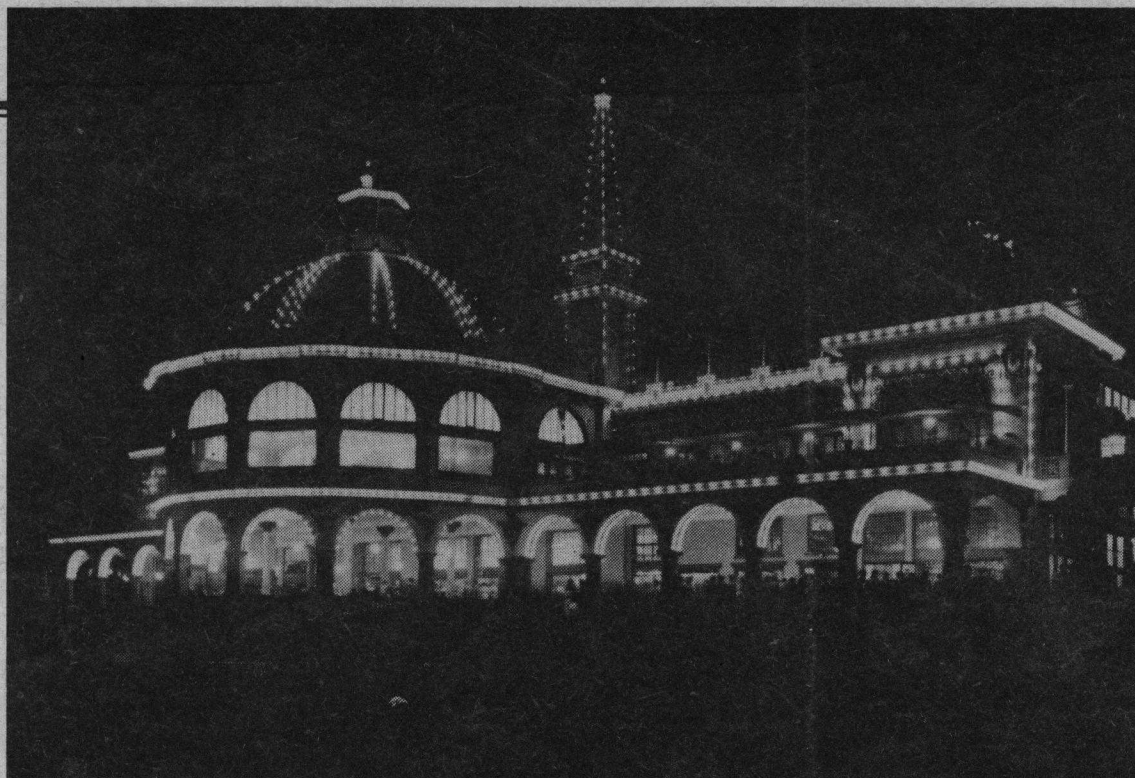
field was known to indulge in a little hyperbole now and then, and it's understandable that he'd want a piece of irrefutable evidence to substantiate what might otherwise be suspected of being just another big fish story.

Littlefield has plenty of stories — and not about fish either. How

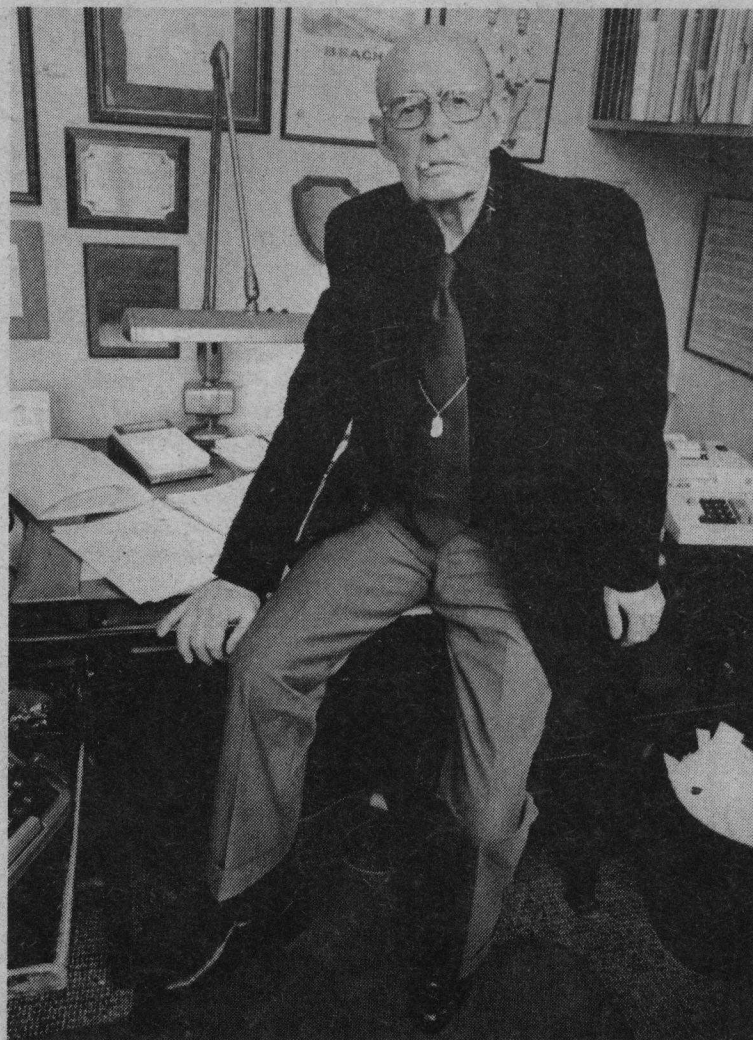
he got lured here in the first place, for instance. The year was 1927 and the poor Santa Cruz Boardwalk was suffering from a bit of prickly publicity in the wake of a couple of drownings in its early surf. Littlefield, who happened to be the Pacific Coast swimming champion at the time, was brought down from Stanford to lend his well-muscled aquatic presence to the local littoral zone. Patrolling beaches may seem a peculiar pursuit to the promulgation of publicity, but one thing — as they say — led to another.

"Back then, this business was too small to be big and too big to be small, if you get what I mean," says Littlefield, lighting up the first in a series of unfiltered Camels. "You had to spread yourself out to justify your wages. You name it — plumbing, wiring, band promotion, finances, scrubbing floors — and I've done it around here."

But what Littlefield did best was keep the Boardwalk's name in the news. From 1927 through 1944, his most thoroughly successful way of doing this was the weekly water carnival staged in the massive indoor natatorium (swimming pool, for you less Latinately inclined) adjacent to the Casino. Obligatory bathing beauties aside, the crowning spectacle of this event was invariably the Human Flying Triangle acro-



## Still Coasting After All These Years



CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD(WALK): Skip Littlefield.

PHOTO: JOE DANIELS



batics performed some 30 feet above pool level.

Dangling from his knees on a suspended swing, yeoman Boardwalk stunt artist Don "Mighty Bosco" Patterson would catch one leaping grammar school boy with his right arm and another one with his left. A third young recruit would hurtle 15 feet from an opposing trapeze through the neat isosceles triangle of arms and somersault into the heated pool water below.

Thrills: yes. Gasps: of course. Applause: deafening. All in a day's work.

"No way you could pull off something like that today," Littlefield admits. "Insurance, child labor laws, the whole deal. It belongs in the past tense."

So does the notorious Slide for Life, another Littlefield-concocted stunt that he still refers to as "the biggest entertainment story the beach will ever know." In this act the perennially tanned Bosco was required to ride a small wheeled carriage down a cable strung from the Casino dome to the end of the since-destroyed pleasure pier — a 743-foot, 20-second journey. Bosco would hold yet another draftee from local grade schools, who would reel off a few quick gymnastic maneuvers before diving away into the ocean.

Ask for Bosco himself, he would tantalize the gaping crowd by waiting until he was four seconds away from pureeing his bones on the pier before uncoupling his legs from the carriage and falling to the salty safety of the tide.

Littlefield never tires of retelling the one thing famed tightwire walker Karl Wallenda had to say about the Slide for Life. Said that master aerial artist, a guest of Littlefield's here in 1975: "A man had to have holes in his head to do a stunt like that."

Wallenda's verdict was hardly the first of its kind. The State Industrial Accident Commission slapped a cease-and-desist order on Littlefield's pulse-quickenings performances in 1940, but not before the incorrigible publicity maestro had upped the coronary ante by conceiving a night-time "fire-slide," where a solo Bosco in gasoline-doused bathing togs swept beachward in a nest of flames.

On a far more placid front, Littlefield was also responsible for engineering the dance and musical offerings hosted on the squeaky clean Cocanut Grove ballroom floor. Prior to the '30s, romantically inclined couples had to waltz and foxtrot to the anthem-like strains of military-style brass ensembles. But with the popularization of the swinging, up-tempo Big Band sound, the Grove became a major site for seeing what a little moonlight could do.

The list of orchestral luminaries



**KNEES DON'T FAIL ME NOW.** Skip Littlefield called this stunt the "Slide for Life." State officials called his bluff.

that swung cool past midnight over the years at the Boardwalk reads like an honor roll of American music in the war era: Benny Goodman, Paul Whiteman, Tommy Dorsey, Lionel Hampton, Stan Kenton. Littlefield opens one of the myriad black notebooks shelved beside his desk, where each evening of band music ever offered is painstakingly recorded. "Here's the biggest of them all," he says, jabbing at the page with his Camel. "Kay Kyser and his College of Musical Knowledge. Paid gate of 3,894."

Fifty years, of course, is a long time in any man's life, and when that life is bound up in a single mile of beachfront, the mills of memory grind exceedingly fine. Pick just about any year along the way and Skip Littlefield's eyes dance: 1938, when the legendary "grandfather of surfing" Duke Kahanamoku paid the Boardwalk a visit, deflowering the vacant Santa Cruz swells with a 15-foot solid redwood board; 1942, when Don McNair set a world record for underwater distance travel in the plunge (343 feet); 1947, when the California Beauty Pageant returned for good to Santa Cruz, a contest of comeliness that drew crowds of over 30,000 on the beach in its better days.

*"When you take the all-time greats of Santa Cruz and put them in a parade, Fred Swanton would be in the very front row"*



A year you might not think of picking is 1912, but it is certainly a crucial one. It was then that six-year-old Skip was first introduced

by his father to Fred Swanton, the man who would later become a mentor and friend of Littlefield and play no small role in Skip's commitment to the Boardwalk's success. Asked about Swanton, Littlefield gazes out his window with greater frequency and draws a bit more pensively on his cigarette.

"When you take the all-time greats of Santa Cruz and put them in a parade," he says slowly, "Fred Swanton would be in the very front row. No question about it. That man did more for promoting and popularizing this coastline than any individual before or since. And what a salesman! I tell you, that man could stroll you out on the wharf there at midnight and get you to make a down payment on it any day of the year."

All the legends you hear about Swanton, adds Littlefield, are true. Yes, he was on good terms with Teddy Roosevelt, Andrew Carnegie and Thomas Edison. Yes, he opened the first hydroelectric generating plant west of the Mississippi and operated the first commercial telephone system in California. Yes, he was as brash as they come. Yes, he made millions. Yes, he lost millions.

Littlefield nods again. "Yes, one year he'd be one of the richest men in the state and the next year he'd be overjoyed if you bought him a hamburger because he couldn't pay for one himself."

For the Brooklyn-bred Swanton, who breathed braggadocio at every turn, an amusement park venture was nothing less than second nature. Schooled on the bewildering pace and fancy of the Gay Nineties beachside resorts of the Atlantic seaboard, he took to the enterprise like one of those proverbial fish to water. The Santa Cruz he discovered as the twentieth century dawned was a community

PHOTO: ED WEBBER

already renowned as an idyllic bathing resort, hailed in a 1894 *Harper's Monthly* as a "haven" and in a 1900 *Sunset* for being "free from undertow and obnoxious fish." All of which was fine, but when Swanton purchased the old Neptune Bathhouses in 1903 and established his Tent City Cooperative, he had bigger (a synonym in those days for better) things in mind.

From the very first, Santa Cruz tourism was spliced into the finances, fortunes and follies of the railroads, so it's no surprise that Swanton had his fingers in the Southern Pacific pie as well. Through his inducement, that many-tentacled corporation invested heavily in the Cooperative, bolstered its already extensive schedule of routes from the Bay Area, plugged seacoast bathing in its widely read *Sunset* magazine and generally painted Santa Cruz as a salty, latter-day Eden.

Just how much credit Swanton should be given for the ensuing Sun Tan Special line that hauled thousands of beachgoers into town some summer weekends is uncertain, but it doesn't seem too wise to sell short the man responsible for initiating Santa Cruz' first electric streetcar system where spikes and rails are concerned.

By 1904 the gleam in Swanton's eye had sprouted turrets and Moorish columns. Goodbye Tent City. With a "blaze of rockets and the boom of bursting bombs," as the *Sentinel* described it, his Neptune Casino made its first big splash that year, its gaudy, exotic architecture resembling some unlikely incarnation out of the *Arabian Nights*. Twenty-two months later (very near the time Skip Littlefield was born) it could have been mistaken instead for a part of Rome burning, as an innocent enough kitchen fire raged out of control and left his grand palatial hall an uninsured shambles.

Should that next Swanton legend be believed as well? That even while the ashes were still smoldering he had already drawn up new



**ONCE WAS NOT ENOUGH:** Fred W. Swanton

plans for a second casino and been promised continued financial support from wealthy partner John Martin? "Oh yes," says Littlefield.

A man of lesser zeal and Barnumesque posturing could never have gotten a second casino off the ground, much less one ensconced in more hoopla and hubbub than its predecessor. But if there was one thing Fred Swanton could do, it was get things off the ground. Like the Casa del Rey Hotel, for instance, which went up in 1911 in the Casino's shadow, boasting the latest in posh hostelry. Or the barcantine *Balboa* which he anchored beyond the pier, a tidy little "pleasure ship" that offered wine, women and the song of the surf to gentlemen weary of landlubber liaisons. Or his own political career, which was launched impressively in 1927 when he was elected Santa Cruz' mayor.

"He was born in an era when you could really do things," says Littlefield with undisguised wistfulness. "Your imagination was the limit." When Swanton died in 1940, he was virtually penniless, attempting even from his deathbed to drum up support for a can't-miss, sure-fire mining venture that (you can imagine him saying) only a fool would pass up.

The writer of his obituary? Skip Littlefield.

*Behind the bokum and bunky-dory antics was a coterie of money-handlers with its fingers at the quickening pulse of America*

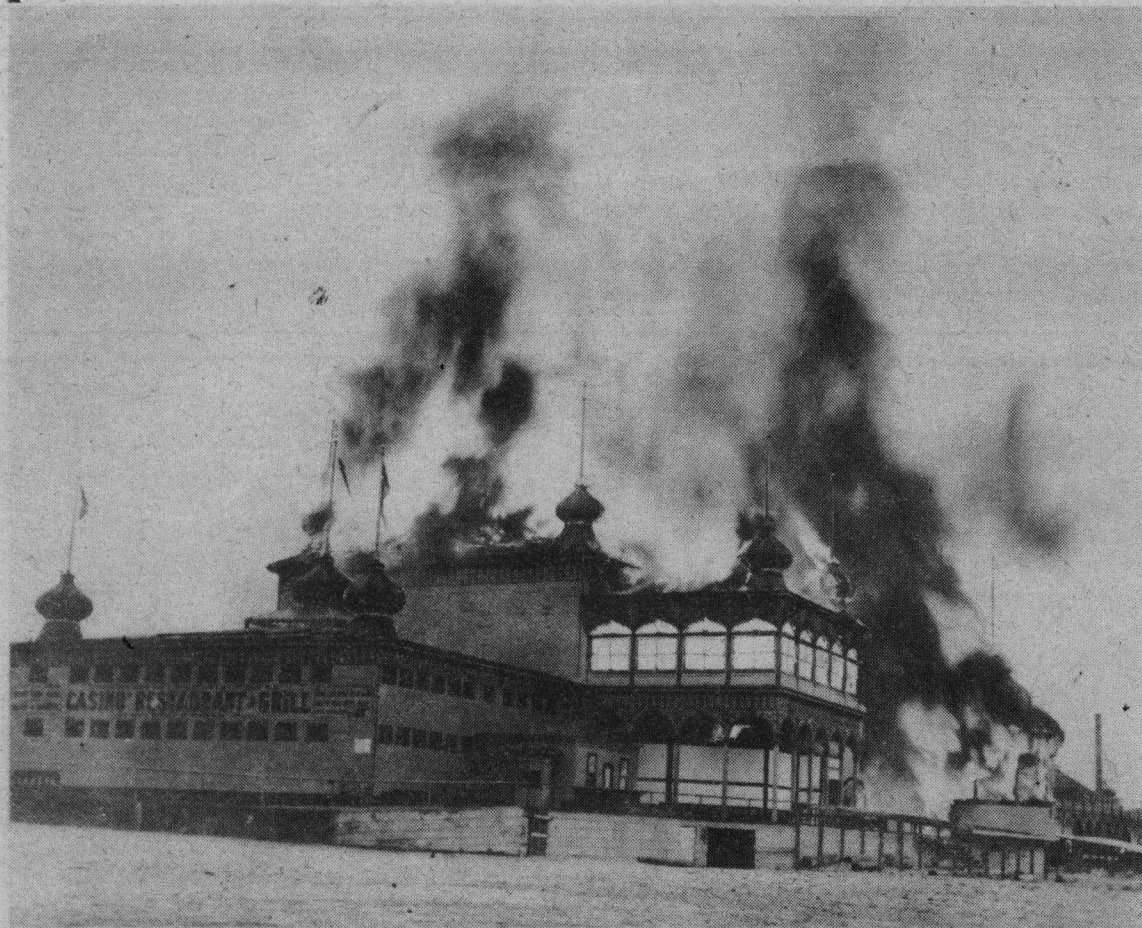


After the strains of J.P. Sousa died down that June afternoon in 1907, it appeared that the hardest work Fred Swanton was going to have ahead of him in his new and improved Boardwalk was sitting back and counting the take. Crowds flocked. Yet by 1912 an unfortunate blend of President William Howard Taft's depressed economy and Swanton's own sloppy money management left casino windows boarded up and casino coffers bankrupt. In the December of 1915, ownership of the Boardwalk enterprise passed into the collective fold of a group of men who called themselves the Santa Cruz Seaside Co.

"We believe," its board declared in a written statement issued soon afterwards, "that Santa Cruz should cater more and more to the great middle class of people, of whom there are so many, with less emphasis on the high-livers, of whom there are so few."

Fair enough. Only don't get them wrong: those pioneering Seaside Company investors





**QUICK, HARRY, CASH IN YOUR CHIPS.** When Swanton's first beachside casino went up in smoke in 1906, it was all over but the shouting, right? Guess again.

were't simply putting their legal tender on the line out of the goodness of their shareholding hearts. They seemed to realize that if the Boardwalk facilities were to be mined for their potential riches, it was crucial to cement the corporation's ties with the community at large, to give the impression (if nothing else) that the entire township of Santa Cruz had a whole lot to gain by Seaside's raking in of tourist dollars. Seaside president S. Waldo Coleman even went as far as to assure the Chamber of Commerce that his business would "act in conjunction with the Chamber and promised its members a \$5,000 subscription for the purpose of publicizing and enhancing the alluring qualities of Santa Cruz.

Everyone, Coleman implied, stood to be a winner. The rip and roar of the Boardwalk would draw vacationers like flies, and the charming shops and citizenry of Santa Cruz would make sure they had plenty of good ways to spend the money they had left over. Such a deal. Still, there were some skeptics who cast baleful eyes over the accelerated commerciality to come, among them Santa Cruz *Surf* editor A.A. Taylor, who noted that "there has always been an irrepressible conflict in Santa Cruz between factories and frivolities. The New England mill village with a payroll was one ideal and the gaudies of Atlantic City the other ideal."

While Seaside Company policies were downright plodding in comparison to Fred Swanton's spectacular *modus operandi*, it must be said that they pursued the business with much keener foresight and old-fashioned common sense. True to its word, Seaside transformed the place into a hot-

bed of family entertainment, hawking a brand of clean-cut diversion that any grandmother could be carted off to. Instead of investing in a new fleet of pleasure yachts, Seaside plunked down top dollar for an elaborate state-of-the-art carousel by master builder Charles Loeff, an intimidating roller coaster by his son Arthur, and more penny machines than you could shake a six-year-old at.

PHOTO: VESTER DICK



**THEY SHOOT PICTURES, DON'T THEY?** Jane Ann Pederson, 1949 pageant winner, strikes a pulchritudinous pose.

The middle-classing of the Boardwalk may have dismayed Fred Swanton — who had always envisioned that beachfront as a private pasture for the affluent — but it was the very shrewdness of that effort that, for better or worse, wedded Santa Cruz to a tourist-mecca economy. By 1926, the so-called "banner year" of Santa Cruz tourism, the Seaside Company had boosted its capital stock to \$11 million, bought up additional oceanside property from its old bedfellow, Southern Pacific, and was beginning to bulge some unexpected political muscles.

Behind the hokum and hunkydory antics of such events as beach poker parties, where shapely women minced about in ace-of-spades and queen-of-hearts sandwich boards, or contests where prizes were dispensed to the "Best Freckle-faced Boy," was a coterie of money-handlers which had its fingers at the quickening pulse of America's desire to have places where the dailiness of life could be temporarily banished.

Talk to most any veteran Santa Cruzan who goes back 50 years and he or she will tell you that it wasn't exactly a jealously guarded secret in those early days that the Seaside Company "ran the town." Not in the violin case and snap-brim fedora sense, of course, but nevertheless no major legislation sprung loose from City Hall if Seaside too severely disapproved and no mayor — not even Fred Swanton — was ushered into office without Seaside's blessing. It would all be hard to substantiate, admonishes former *Sentinel* writer Jane Hass, except through oral accounts. But Seaside's local political brawn was "common knowledge at the time."

*As one of the County's most extensive landowners and its largest taxpayer, the pulling of community strings is not beyond Seaside's means*



When San Francisco's Playland (the nearest rival pea in the California amusement park pod) succumbed in 1970, it gave the Seaside Company a chance to blow a few modest bars on its own horn. Unlike that similarly graybearded oceanside operation, Santa Cruz Boardwalk had pursued a formidable maintenance program and had learned to bend here and there to the demands of the times. Crowded the *Sentinel* upon noting the occasion: "Playland obviously didn't give the people what they want. The Boardwalk does."

It sounds rather easy, this giving the people what they want, yet for amusement park barons after 1955 the scaling of Anapurna couldn't have proven a more merciless task. It was that year, don't forget, that Disneyland swung open its rodent-emblazoned doors and redefined the industry in one fell swoop. That tract of Walt's was no park, but a Kingdom. A Magic one, no less. The whole idea was to lose yourself anyway, wasn't it, so why not let the thing sprawl over some 180 acres, where getting lost was actually a physical prerequisite rather than just a contrived state of mind?

Oh, America still coveted its factories of fantasy and forgetting, all right, only now it was becoming more sophisticated about it. So the Seaside Company followed suit. The natatorium near and dear to Skip Littlefield's heart was replaced in 1962 with a miniature golf course. In 1973, the archaic Fun House went down in favor of a batch of bumper cars and the Jet Star mini-coaster ride was brought in to bolster the scream quotient. The much-ballyhooed Logger's Revenge flume ride made its debut in 1977, usurping the decidedly meek Wild Mouse ride.

A somewhat more questionable nod towards fashion saw the welcoming of two insipid mascots — the ever ecstatic Captain Carefree and Wellington the Pelican — into the Boardwalk fold in 1978.

But marketing is not the only issue here. The fact that no elegies are in order for the Boardwalk, as Skip Littlefield acutely relates, has as much to do with where it's situated as what it's pitching. "We draw primarily from Santa Clara and San Mateo counties," he says. "Not like in the old days when a lot of patrons used to trek over from the Central Valley. There's San Jose next door there, one of the fastest growing cities in the country and we're the only park

of our kind around. And we've always had the most attractive beachfront of all."

Then there's maintenance. Seaside has made a practice out of pouring money back into renovation and rigorous operational protocol. Where Playland's roller coaster finally got itself condemned from lack of proper upkeep, the Giant Dipper is accorded all the reverent handling it deserves. In 1976, for instance, the reward was a complete paint job for the tidy sum of \$80,000.

A year ago giving the people what they wanted meant borrowing a few million dollars from Bank of America to perform a

#### Editor's Note

*Vintage photographs were provided through the generosity of that grand old man of the Boardwalk, Mr. Skip Littlefield.*

*Our cover illustration of the Boardwalk is by award-winning framer and graphic designer, Jay Collins. The original poster is a larger four-color beauty (we had to cut the top and bottom off), and is available in a limited premiere edition of 100 signed and framed prints. A second unsigned edition will be available May 1. Jay Collins may be reached at 427-3673.*

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flourish of a facelift on the old Cocoanut Grove interiors, complete with a startling retractable glass ceiling. One thing people tend to want more of than just about anything else is room to park their cars, so the next distant chapter in this ongoing saga of giving will be a multi-level auto

garage looming beside the Casa del Rey Hotel.

With all those scenes it has to work behind, the Seaside Company keeps pretty much to itself these days. But as one of the county's most extensive private landowners, its largest taxpayer and the cornerstone of its tourism

trade, the pulling of community strings is not beyond Seaside's means — nor is making a good name for itself. When the Boardwalk's payroll swells from 300 to 1,000 during the summer season, a healthy portion of those blue windbreakered jobs are doled out to local matriculants, a fact which

Seaside publicity gremlins won't let anybody forget.

Forgetting isn't something that Skip Littlefield's planning to do too much of either. Though formally retired as of two years ago, the Boardwalk's resident historian and grand old stager of stunts still retains a fastidious

office where he courts recollection with his imposing black notebooks and relentless scissoring of clippings. As he lights up his seventh cigarette of the hour, it's safe to say that, yes, he might walk a mile for a Camel, but only if that mile is the one from one end of the Boardwalk to the other. □