

# BOARDWALK: Sifting through almost a century of history

*EDITOR'S NOTE: The Sentinel is celebrating its 150th year in 2006 by reaching into our archives to republish some of the noteworthy stories out of the past, and also to take a closer look at some of Santa Cruz's most famous landmarks — such as the Boardwalk — and people.*

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As the Santa Cruz Boardwalk prepares to celebrate its 100th anniversary in 2007, archivists in charge of preserving its history are dusting off decades worth of games, prizes, sou-

venirs, and especially photographs to examine how the seaside amusement park — and the people who frequent it — has changed over the years.

"There's a lot of stuff in here that's one-of-a-kind," said archivist Bonnie Minford as she led a behind-the-scenes tour of the Boardwalk complex on a recent afternoon. Minford's spent the last 25 years cleaning, organizing, and preserving that "stuff." Instead of storing it in a dark room, she and her colleagues have put it on display throughout the facilities. That's why wandering through the Neptune's Kingdom, the assortment of rides, and

the maze of the Cocoanut Grove is like taking a walk through time.

Some of the memorabilia was once a physical part of the Boardwalk culture. Scattered throughout the complex are several old arcade games. One of them — a tall wooden contraption called "The Doctor" — still bears a sign promising an electrical shock to daring participants, though it's broken now. Glass cases lining the hallways hold faded ticket stubs, tarnished wooden spoons, and ceramic Boardwalk plates. A bedraggled cloth feline represents the only remnants of a sinister-sounding past time called "Cat Whack." And

a little glass dog serves as a reminder of what prizes were like before stuffed animals became the carnival reward of choice.

But it's the photographs — some over a century old — that really give a sense of how the Boardwalk has changed. Most of them are labeled with the dates they were taken. But with a trained eye it's easy to tell the year or era even without a label, Minford said.

"When you date them, you have to look at all the things along the way," she said, pointing to a photograph of

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Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Boardwalk archivist Bonnie Minford with a pair of photographs from the late 1940s. The photos, from the Ed Webber collection, show Miss California for 1947, Jean Emery, left, and a pageant contestant at Natural Bridges.

## Boardwalk

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the Santa Cruz beach during a time when delicate-looking umbrellas covered most of the sand as well as the faces of freckle-free ladies.

Minford points out a portrait of Boardwalk founder Fred Swanton and a picture of the Suntan Special, a train that carried folks from San Jose to Swanton's creation in the early 1900s.

"Everyone had the idea to build a park like Coney Island," said Minford. The Boardwalk was Swanton's dream, she explained. Swanton started by building an onion-domed casino ("for entertainment and amusement, not gambling," she said) at the site of the Cocoanut Grove. Stationing it at the end of a railroad line encouraged ridership and bolstered the Santa Cruz economy, too.

But another photo, taken in 1906, shows original building engulfed in a massive fire. Flames shoot from the top of the

spires. It burned down. No matter, Minford said: Within a year Swanton had built a new one.

One of city's favorite gathering spots until the early 1960s was the Plunge swimming pool, now filled in and occupied by Neptune's Kingdom. Only the most adventurous men ventured into the deep end, said Minford, pointing to a poster-sized picture of circa-1907 swimmers splashing around in the water. A balcony surrounded the pool. Minford grinned as she tapped her finger over the faces of curious women observing the lads below.

And nearly a half-dozen of the pictures reveal that beauty pageants were once one of Santa Cruz's favorite events. Miss California 1924 is shown wearing a gigantic glittery crown similar to that on the Statue of Liberty. Miss Santa Cruz 1925, Yetta Haber, wears a thigh-length swimsuit and poses with a hand on her hip. Another photo shows a bevy of beauties walking across a stage set up on the beach as a gigantic crowd looks on near the Boardwalk.

One of the photographs she likes best, Minford said, is of

two senior citizens reading a newspaper outside the old Casa del Rey building after the 1989 earthquake. The building was a popular hotel in the early days of the Boardwalk. It served as a military hospital for wounded WWII soldiers in the 1940s and later became a retirement home. When the quake hit the residents were displaced to the parking lot. The building was eventually leveled. Now a parking lot takes its place.

After the photo tour it was on to the "official" archive: Minford's office. It's a small room hidden within the maze of hallways. Here metal filing cabinets line the walls and store documents, additional pictures, and other memorabilia. An old poster hangs on the wall, as well as a photograph of Skip Littlefield, the original Boardwalk archivist. Otherwise the office is sparse — not stuffed with random objects as one might expect.

That might be because it's difficult to fit everything into a folder, drawer, or even room.

Shrugged Minford, "The whole building is an archive."