

# After Three Decades' Silence, Sal Laffs Again

Boardwalk  
by Sarah Weston

**H**erb Caen called her "hideous," and said that his childhood friends used to cover their ears as they passed her. Others with first-hand acquaintance have opined her to be "grotesque," "terrifying" or "nightmarish."

The much-maligned woman in question is Laffing Sal, the six-foot automated figure who for decades delighted as well as terrified visitors to San Francisco's Playland-at-the-Beach. Last month, Sal found a permanent new home at the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, where she will grace the entrance to Neptune's Kingdom.

"I think she frightened children because she was large and loud," said Boardwalk archivist Bonnie Minford. "[Some people] laughed with her. Some were frightened and some weren't."

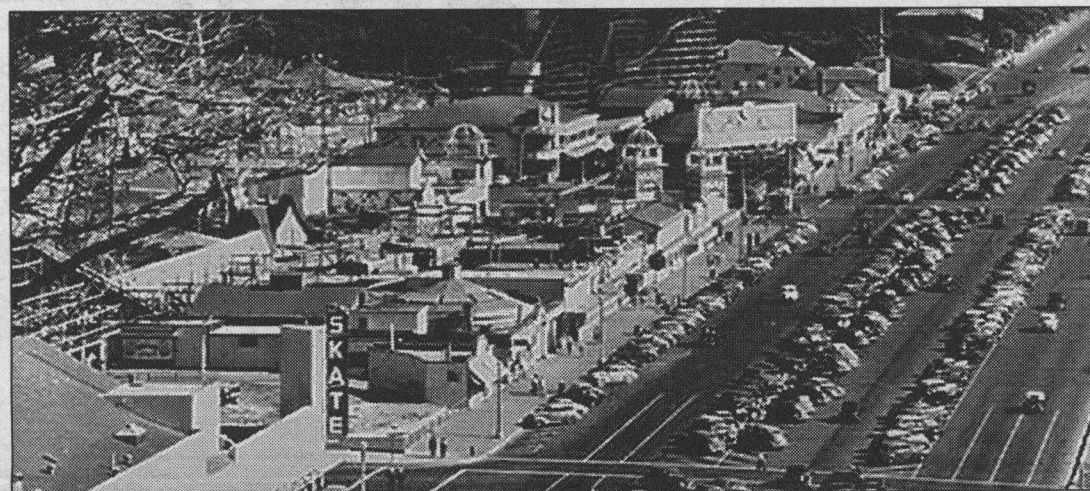
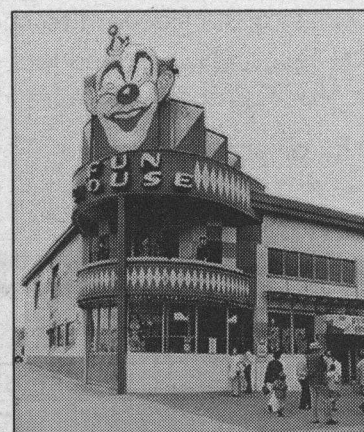
To be fair to Sal, she wasn't really hideous. Her freckles, gap-toothed grin and spring-loaded bosom are more befitting a hayseed bit player on "Hee Haw" than the Bride of Chuckie. And the same graying veterans who once cringed in her presence as children now profess almost universal nostalgia for the experience.

What made Sal so disconcerting was the namesake maniacal laughter that accompanied her jerky contortions. Widely available on the Internet, her unrestrained cackle is an audio Rorschach test in which the listener can discern giddy merriment, inconsolable grief, or outright lunacy as she or he chooses.

In truth, at least according to the owner of the company that made her, Sal's laugh was the 1930 recording of a male musician who had been liberally plied with Jack Daniels in a Canton, Ohio radio station.

## From Santa to Sal

For her part, Sal was a rehabilitated Santa Claus. Built by the Old King Cole Papier Mache



Top left: Laffing Sal today. Top middle: Playland's Laffing Sal and friend.  
Top right: The entrance to the Fun House at Playland.  
Bottom: San Francisco's Playland, circa 1940.

Company of Canton, Sal was reworked from an existing laughing Santa sold to department stores. Her face was designed by Bert Lower, who later became an art director in Walt Disney's amusement park division.

Generations of San Franciscans who considered Sal a proprietary icon will be chagrined to discover that she was not unique to their city. Some 300 were built in the decade following 1930, of which a dozen or so survive.

Sal was commissioned by the Philadelphia Toboggan Company (PTC), makers of amusement park rides of that era. One ubiquitous feature of the parks, including Playland, was a funhouse with mirrored mazes, rotating barrels, shifting stairs and giant wooden turntables to which children clung before being ejected by centrifugal force.

PTC felt that an animated figure at the entry would both welcome visitors and put them in the

right mood to have jets of air blown up their skirts or mirrors distort their features. Sal became more or less a standard fixture at parks across the country.

At some parks Sal was given a husband, Laffing Sam. There was also a Laffing Luke and Laffing Farmer, as well as Giggling Gertie and Blackie the Sideshow Barker. None of these remotely began to approach the popularity of Sal, who struck a unique psychological chord.

## Sal Goes to Hollywood

Sal's creepy appeal was seen in a number of movies. In 1953's "Man in the Dark" her cackle triggered an amnesiac's memory. Playland's funhouse was the site of the climactic scene of "Lady from Shanghai," and Sal provides the mocking chorus at the conclusion of "Woman on the Run." She even did a cameo in a Christine Aguilara video.

World War II spelled the end

of production of Laffing Sal. PTC sold its funhouse division to the Funni-Frite company, which resurrected a latex version of Sal for a brief period before its demise in 2000.

Playland-at-the-Beach saw its own demise in 1972. By then it suffered from long neglect as well as being outdistanced by a newer, more technologically hip generation of amusement parks. It had become infested with vandals, muggers and drug dealers who gave Sal's cackle a sardonic twist. The park was torn down and replaced by condominiums.

Sal was sold to collector John Wickett, a millionaire socialite who maintained a private Museum of Exotica in San Francisco. Besides Sal, the Museum contained such things as 16th-century tapestries and a silver-plated human skull, as well as various articles of erotica. Wickett died last year, and his estate was sold off to auction.

Wickett stipulated that Sal should go to go to someone who would display her publicly. Some would decry that he didn't specify "within San Francisco," for when the gavel went down it was the Santa Cruz Seaside Company, owner of the Boardwalk, that had bought Sal for \$50,000. Sal's original cost was \$360.

## Not Without Controversy

Sal's re-emergence has not been without controversy. For one thing, there were two Laffing Sals at Playland. The other currently resides on display at the Musee Mecanique at Fisherman's Wharf in Monterey. Opinions vary as to which one saw more active duty on display at the Funhouse.

To make matters worse, San Franciscan David Cherry appeared in a *San Francisco Chronicle* article last year claiming that the original Sal's head had been stolen in 1972 just before the park was razed, and that he had it. He said a teenage friend, distraught at the demise of the park, had snatched it and ran. Cherry then bought it from the friend a few years later for an undisclosed amount.

While it's a matter of record that a couple of replacement heads were made, it's less clear just which head ended up where and whether the Boardwalk Sal is an amalgamation of parts. But this is speculation that Boardwalk archivist Minford emphatically denies.

"We know because of damage on the figure that can be seen on old photographs that we have the original one and we have the original head and body," said Minford. "You can see the damage that you can also in the old photographs at Playland."

Sal, decked out in a new replica of her 80-year-old outfit, was unveiled in a Boardwalk ceremony on May 27, complete with digitally-remastered laugh (or laff). Despite her upgrades, she is the same old Sal.

"We are absolutely sure and satisfied that ours is the one that [was heard] laughing at Playland," said Minford. □