



The Giant Dipper turns 60

30 million riders can't be wrong

EDITOR'S NOTE — It was 60 years ago today that perhaps Santa Cruz' most famous landmark began operation — the Giant Dipper. Skip Littlefield, writer, historian and chronicler of the Santa Cruz waterfront, prepared this look back.

By SKIP LITTLEFIELD

SANTA CRUZ — Sixty years have witnessed many anniversaries since this community celebrated a historic heritage-producing May 17, 1924.

Entrepreneur Fred Swanton proclaimed that little Mary Black was chosen to represent this city in the state's first "Miss California Beauty Contest." Then Arthur Loeff unveiled one of the world's classic amusement rides — the Giant Dipper Roller Coaster. Both events focused national attention on the Boardwalk.

Living on Beach Hill today is Mary Black Roberts. Still a seashore survivor is the Giant Dipper. Both are well and very much alive.

Santa Cruz' first roller coaster was not the Dipper. Pioneer honors belong to Col. Artemus Forbes, a flashy Oakland promoter who invested \$3,900 in his "California Roller Coaster Tobaggon Ride."



Warren Littlefield Historical Files

Dipper builder Arthur Loeff

Location was a vacant lot on Pacific Avenue near Maple Street. Grand opening was June 13, 1886.

Ride height was 24 feet, and length of the "thriller" was 500 feet on a circular track. Ten cents was charged for the 14-second hair raiser. Said the Santa Cruz

Sentinel: "The screams of the timid add to the excitement, but almost before a person is aware of it he or she has reached the end of the track."

Col. Forbes stay was a brief 60 days. On Aug. 15, 1886, the sheriff served a writ of attachment in the amount of \$140. The luckless owner left for parts unknown.

Twenty-two years later, Henry Hile, business manager of the New Jersey-based L.A. Thompson Scenic Railway Co., watched the marine spectacle afforded by Theodore Roosevelt's Great White Fleet anchored off San Lorenzo Point on May 2, 1908. Hile was impressed by the Santa Cruz Boardwalk potential. A Scenic Railway came into being on the present Dipper location which was opened with due fanfare on July 1, 1908.

A crew of 35 men worked on construction. Trains were made locally using Thompson patents. Hile claimed it was a longer, better and swifter ride than any previous fun railways built by Thompson. They had 60 locations throughout America, Canada and Europe. Only other Scenic Railway in California was at Oakland's Idora Park.

The new ride had its problems. It was designed for the pace of a horse and buggy era. Rider comfort, scenery and fresh air were featured, while speed and thrills were secondary. Annual San Lorenzo River flooding plus winter tides caused high maintenance costs.

L.A. Thompson sold his rights to the Santa Cruz Beach Co. for \$1 on July 1, 1911. Acquired by the newly-formed Santa Cruz Seaside Co. in 1916, the Scenic Railway struggled through stormy financial waters until it was demolished in 1923. The original cost was \$35,000. Ten cents was charged for a ride.

Arthur Loeff put the roar in the Roaring 20s with the engineering and construction of the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk Giant Dipper in 1924. His name remains as one of the giants of an automotive age attuned to amusement rides.

Loeff was the son of Charles I.D. Loeff, a Danish wood carver who emigrated to New York in 1870. Subsequent history designates him among the elite designers and builders of Merry-Go-Rounds. He fashion-

Please see Page A2



Warren Littlefield Historical Files

Beach Street was a muddy pathway when the Giant Dipper was built