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NEWS & VIEWS

SKULL & BONE SOCIETY Actually, the Haunted Castle isn't that scary, which is why it will be overhauled next year.

Not Quite Fright Night

The Boardwalk's Haunted Castle receives a stay of execution before a major remodel **BY JESSICA LUSSENHOP**

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There's nothing scary about the Haunted Castle dark ride on the Beach Boardwalk. Well, almost nothing. "Smells like someone threw up in here," chuckles John Kettles, a 46-year-old "roller coaster addict" and dark ride enthusiast, as the black podlike car bumps through the front doors. Kettles worked at the dark ride as a teenager in the '70s and points out the things that have changed since his tenure. He indicates with his voice, in the muddy darkness, where the bus with the ghost driver used to jump out and where a giant bear, now a werewolf, once loomed.

There's not a lot of movement from the ghouls inside. They mostly pop up in a pool of light as the car rolls past. In one corner a giant tarantula rasps to life, nodding and shivering. In another a diabolical chef is frozen with his spoon dipped in some luckless, slow-cooked person. It's cute.

On one turn, something to the left of the car sputters, but nothing emerges from the dark. The ride is not exactly in tip-top shape. "The one thing that's supposed to turn around and scare you didn't even light up," Kettles says afterward on the boardwalk. "It used to be a lot better."

There was good reason for the Santa

Cruz Seaside Company to let the decades-old machinery slide—Haunted Castle was scheduled to close after this season for massive renovations, including the addition of a second floor. That's been postponed since Seaside got a bit scared by something else: the rocky state of the economy. "It's a very expensive new ride, and given the state of the national economy and the credit crisis, it was financially smart to postpone it," says community relations director Kris Reyes. The renovations are now planned for next year, with the help of an amusement company based in Anaheim.

Reyes says objections of some locals have not played a part in the delay, though some have been expressed to *Metro Santa Cruz*. Historically speaking, however, there isn't much inside the gloomy tunnels that dates back to the original opening as Dante's Inferno, the "Trip Through Hades," in 1932. Since then, the ride has been through several incarnations: Laff-Land, Treasure Island, Pirates Cove, Haunted House. Many of the parts, figures and backgrounds have changed, brought in from other amusement parks and venues, thanks to people like 76-year-old Jan Fencil, the now-retired technical artist who started in 1987. He contributed innumerable

figures, including the werewolf, cannibal cook, the skeleton hand clock outside and the design for the two-person cars. "I worked on many, many skulls," says Fencil. "Once I was working on them, I turn around and somebody had stolen, like, four of them. I could create one in 20, 30 minutes, because I had the mold. But people take anything. Anything."

Haunted Castle took up residence in 1973, when Kettles was a teenager and an extremely committed employee—he used to hide among the animatronics to jump out at riders. "I got away with it a few times," he says. "It definitely made the ride a lot scarier. I figured it was good for ticket sales."

And though riders' shrieks still echo through his memory, Kettles is more excited about the potential of the new ride, plans for which include the second floor, completely redesigned frights and a castle-themed overhaul of the outside. "That's just the way the boardwalk is. It changes, and for the better," he says. "No one's going to miss the old Haunted Castle."

That includes Jan Fencil, who, when asked if he was sad that his creations are losing their home, said, "No, not really. The company has to go forward, you know?" **M**