

Tradition and family have always been tantamount at the Boardwalk. Charles Canfield is making sure it stays that way.

ENJOYING THE RIDE

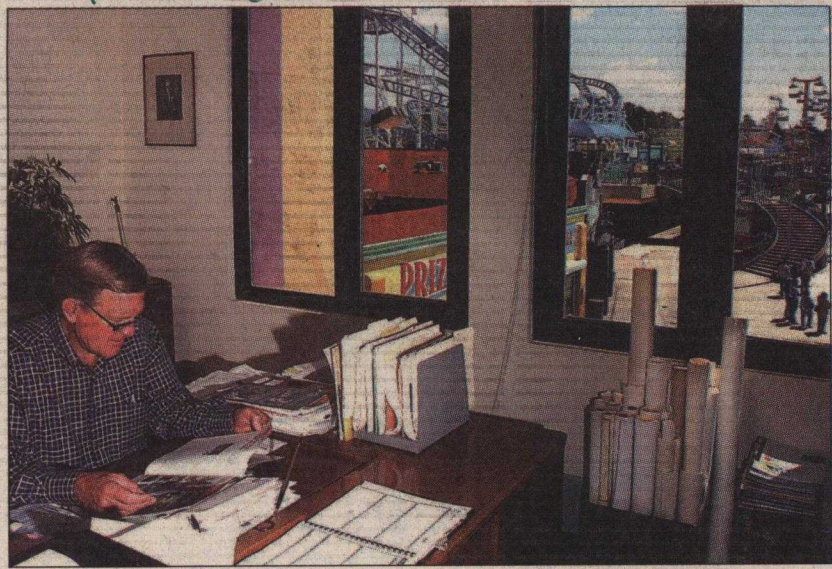


Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

Charles Canfield still gets a thrill from riding the Giant Dipper. He took over as president of the Boardwalk in 1984.

Boardwalk

6.10.07



Charles Canfield, in his office at the Boardwalk, can see visitors arrive at the Santa Cruz amusement park. On the wall behind him is a photo of his father, who was president of the Seaside Co. for 32 years.

Charles Canfield's Boardwalk milestones

- 1939:** Born in Santa Cruz.
 - 1957:** Graduated from Santa Cruz High School.
 - 1961:** Graduated from University of Oregon, business administration major.
 - 1962:** Graduated from Naval Officer Training School, Newport, R.I. Toured Far East.
 - 1964:** Became Boardwalk concessionaire.
 - 1965:** Appointed to Seaside Co. board of directors.
 - 1969:** Elected vice president of Seaside Co. board.
 - 1973:** Bought concessions from Giovanazzo Domenic, who retired after 40 years.
 - 1984:** Elected president of Seaside Co., succeeding his father, who died after 32 years in the post.
 - 1990:** Remodeled the Plunge post-earthquake to create Neptune's Kingdom miniature golf course and arcade.
 - 1991:** Hosted fireworks show on beach to celebrate city's birthday.
 - 1992:** Began recruiting in Europe for summer employees.
 - 1993:** Hosted entertainer Tiny Tim.
 - 1994:** Acquired bowling lanes, remodeled and renamed Boardwalk Bowl.
 - 1995:** Resurrected Suntan Special train; brought in ice skaters; won first of 12 awards for recycling.
 - 2000:** Redesigned Cave Train ride, added Dance Dance Revolution in arcade.
 - 2001:** Opened Ghost Blasters 'dark' ride.
 - 2002:** Hosted Halloween haunted house in parking lot.
 - 2004:** Bought Laffing Sal.
 - 2005:** Opened Double Shot thrill ride.
 - 2006:** Opened WipeOut thrill ride; opened new restaurant Hot Dawgs.
 - 2007:** Bought 1918 Wurlitzer 165 band organ to accompany Looft Carousel.
- In the works: New haunted castle ride.

The man behind the magic

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story is part of an occasional series examining the cultural, political and economic role of the Beach Boardwalk. The Boardwalk celebrates its centennial this year.

By **JONDI GUMZ**
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ

At 12 years of age, Charles Canfield traveled with his father as he visited amusement parks across America, looking for the secrets to their success.

When they returned home in the summer of 1952, Canfield's father embarked on ambitious plans to rebuild his amusement park and keep the family owned business going. That strategy has proven to be a winner.

This summer, the Beach Boardwalk is celebrating its 100th birthday.

At 44, Canfield inherited the mantle of his father, succeeding him 23

years ago as president of the Seaside Co., which runs the Boardwalk. It's a record for longevity few executives can match.

From his second-story beachfront office decorated with posters and photographs of bygone days, Canfield can see the Giant Dipper roller coaster, strollers on the sand, sea lions in the surf and waves that roll incessantly toward shore.

As in his father's era, the Boardwalk offers free admission, with visitors paying for rides, food and games. But the summer entertainment world has changed dramatically over the past two decades.

Numerous family owned amusement parks have closed, falling victim to rising property values, challenging operating costs and the changing tastes of thrill-seekers who favor computerized fun and waterpark slides.

Although the park brings 3 million visitors a year to Santa Cruz, profits

Canfield

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are never guaranteed. To keep visitors coming back and attracting new ones, Canfield must walk a fine line between providing a nostalgic atmosphere and keeping the Boardwalk up to date.

"We're fighting for people's time and the leisure dollar," he said.

He doesn't see a need to carry a cell phone, yet he recognizes the growth of the commerce on the Web, selling ride passes online.

At 67, Canfield has no desire to retire.

He's spurned overtures from Six Flags, the second biggest theme park operator in America, and football stadium concessionaire Ogden Foods — turning away offers "in the millions" to buy the Boardwalk's prime beachfront real estate.

"I don't entertain them," Canfield said. "Venture capitalists are prowling around. Quite a few like to buy things. I'm not particularly interested in that. We've worked too long and too hard to build what we have to let a guy with a lot of money break it up."

Tall and trim, he's dressed in casual khakis and a blue plaid long-sleeved shirt, yet has a formal manner. He doesn't look his age until he takes out his eyeglasses.

He remembers that journey with his father like it was yesterday.

Asking questions

The story of the Canfield family and the Boardwalk starts with Canfield's father, Laurence. Born in Santa Cruz in 1904, he earned a degree from Stanford University in 1926, then returned home to join his father's real estate and insurance firm.

He invested in the fledgling Seaside Co., which built the Giant Dipper roller coaster in 1924 as the stock market boomed. In 1928, a year before Wall Street crashed, he was elected to the board of directors.

Centennial celebration

The Beach Boardwalk hosts a summer fireworks show at 9 p.m. Saturday at Main Beach in honor of its centennial. The show will be choreographed to a custom music score.

This is the first summer fireworks show at the Boardwalk since the mid-1970s.

Rides will be open from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Call 426-7433 or visit www.beachboardwalk.com.

He came back to the Boardwalk and he's never worked anywhere else.

At age 33, Canfield bought the game concessions at the park from a longtime operator who was retiring.

Many of the games were old-fashioned, like the Cat Rack, where the goal is to knock a cat figure over with a ball to win a prize.

Canfield was interested in buying an Indy 500 game, based on the famous raceway. The eight-player game cost \$35,000, a significant sum for the 1970s.

Yet Canfield's intuition proved to be correct. The game paid for itself the first year.

Spending with care

Canfield describes his father as "a neat mentor," someone who would give you a lot of latitude but step in when he felt the need.

In 1982, the Boardwalk's 75th anniversary year, Canfield saw that firsthand. At the time, he was vice president; his father had been president for 30 years.

The Casino was getting a much-needed face-lift. The project was three-quarters finished and over budget. Interest rates rose daily, hitting 21 percent, and executives from Bank of America, which had loaned the Boardwalk \$7 million for the project, came in to look at where their money was going.

"For the size of the company, it was very difficult," Canfield



Contributed photo

The Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk's Wild Mouse ride gave plenty of riders an unexpected scare in its day. It has since been replaced by the Logger's Revenge.

gold foil paint, they create ambience and atmosphere that are key to the Boardwalk's charm.

After Canfield's father took over the amusement park in 1952, he had a choice. He told a Sentinel reporter, "We could make a lot of money here if we wanted to let the place go to hell."

He opted to reinvest instead, saying, "I want this to be something I, myself, and the whole community can be proud of."

It's a philosophy the Canfield family still embraces, a tradition handed down from father to son.

Canfield's son Tom, 38, agrees, calling it "the best business decision dad got from grandpa."

Few visitors this year may

notice the new cement walkway installed over the winter. Parts of the walkway were 60 years old. When it's finished, the cost will total more than \$1 million.

"Those are hard to invest in because you get no return," Canfield said.

Nevertheless, he pursued the project, knowing that anything on pilings has to be replaced.

The words of his father no doubt echoed in his mind.

Tapping experts

The Seaside Co. has stockholders, most of them from Santa Cruz, but it's a closed corporation, which means the stock is not traded on

the open market.

As president of the Seaside Co., Canfield sits on the company's five-man board of directors. The composition of the board hasn't changed since 1984, which is when Canfield took over the president's spot after his father's death.

Three of the five board members are related to Canfield's sister, Saralee Millslagle. The fifth is related to James Williamson, whose investment in the Boardwalk Casino in 1915 kept it from shutting down.

"I keep them abreast of where we are," Canfield said. "They look at the financial side. It's good to have an outside read. It keeps me on my toes."

Canfield alerted the board when he heard about a 1918 Wurlitzer band organ on the market in Indiana for \$250,000. Members agreed it was worth a look, and Canfield flew to the Midwest with webmaster and sound specialist Donaven Staab.

The 1918 Wurlitzer is now delighting visitors at the Boardwalk's merry-go-round, which has been entertaining young and old since 1911.

"This is what I like to do," said Canfield, stopping to listen to a marching tune as he walked past. "It makes me feel good."

When Canfield wants expert advice, he calls on friends like Paul Borchardt of the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions.

Borchardt, who runs Wonderland Amusement Park in Amarillo, plans to expand the 56-year-old attraction, capitalizing on its location near the Canadian River and the zoo.

His wife, Paula, said one of their daughters' fondest memories is the Christmas they visited California and toured the Boardwalk.

"They were so excited to be where the Clint Eastwood movie and 'Lost Boys' were filmed," she said. "They recognized the midway from the movies."

The Canfield family has long been associated with the amusement park trade association. Canfield's father headed the group in 1964-65, the years the World's Fair brought a monorail to Flushing Meadows on Long Island in New York.

Canfield's son Tom, currently Seaside Co. vice president, is active in the group's organization for small parks.

For amusement park owners, it's a small world, and connections can pay off. Here is one example.

After Great America opened an hour away in Santa Clara featuring a water ride, the Boardwalk hatched the Logger's Revenge. When Southern Pacific Railroad

Dipper roller coaster in 1924 as the stock market boomed. In 1928, a year before Wall Street crashed, he was elected to the board of directors.

In 1943, his father died, leaving him \$6,000 in debt. Undaunted, he grew the insurance business through involvement in Rotary, Moose and Odd Fellows as well as state and national associations. In 1952, his reputation as a civic leader and successful businessman made him the choice of the Seaside Co. board to succeed the late Louis Jenkins. To protect his investment in the amusement company, he set out to learn more about the industry.

Canfield remembers his father had two questions when he visited amusement parks around the country: What did you do right? What did you do wrong?

He remembers visiting Paragon Park in Massachusetts. The owner had installed a "dark ride," carrying visitors through a spooky indoor environment, but the location was unfortunate, allowing light to enter at an inopportune moment.

"When you make a mistake, it can be very expensive," Canfield said.

He recalled how another park owner had to redo the track for an "AutoRama" sports car ride because the rough surface left tires in shreds.

The lessons he learned seem fresh in his mind as he ponders creating a new "Haunted Castle" ride.

Canfield explains that the ride is being designed from scratch, with artists from Anaheim putting concepts on paper. He's not sure exactly what it might look like or when it might go in, so details are under wraps, like a secret mission known only to a few loyalists.

As for Paragon Park, it no longer stands like a sentinel on Nantasket Beach. It was torn down in the mid-1980s and replaced by condos.

Taking a risk

Canfield hasn't spent his entire life at the Boardwalk.

As a teenager, he was a ride operator, manning Bulgy the Whale, a kiddie ride. After two summers, he advised his father that he was ready to try something new.

He spent a very hot summer in Felton working as a lumberman. It wasn't an experience he wanted to repeat.

loaned the Boardwalk \$7 million for the project, came in to look at where their money was going.

"For the size of the company, it was very difficult," Canfield recalled.

His father, having experienced the Great Depression and fearing the company couldn't make the payments, wanted to stop the work.

"We couldn't do that," Canfield said. "We had to see it through."

He recommended postponing some parts of the project instead.

"I will never forget walking in the basement [of the Boardwalk] with my father, and he noticed a pipe-fitting on the ground," Canfield recalled. "He said, 'These people are wasteful.'"

When state officials launched an initiative to encourage businesses to reduce waste, the Boardwalk was among the first to respond. Compressors cut energy use for ice machines. Water is reclaimed and reused. Plastic bottles are recycled.

Since 1995, the company has won 12 consecutive state awards for waste reduction.

Canfield, who drives to work in a hybrid Toyota Camry from his home in Swanton, voices concern about global warming.

"Anybody with half a brain should think about it," he said. "We're all part of the planet."

In Canfield's office, meetings are held at an 80-year-old oak table, an heirloom from his father. An antique "Puss in Boots" penny arcade game stands in the corner — "damn near as old as the company," Canfield said. Down the hallway, old advertising posters and memorabilia serve as decorations. Much, much more is kept in storage.

Nothing is thrown away.

Investing with pride

The "basement," as Canfield calls it, is something few Boardwalk visitors see.

It's actually two basements, one he built after the 1989 earthquake and the other built earlier by his father. Together, these hidden spaces under the rides and attractions serve as a vast warehouse for technical services vital to operating an amusement park.

Rides are tuned up, signs repainted and arcade games repaired.

This is where mechanics and electricians, carpenters and painters hold sway. With fiberglass and

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hatched the Logger's Revenge. When Southern Pacific Rail

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opposed the configuration of the ride over its train track, threatening to put the kibosh on the project, Canfield tapped then-general manager Dana Morgan to intercede.

A company founded by Morgan's father, Arrow Development, which built rides for Walt Disney, had been sold to the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad. The Rio Grande legal department called the Southern Pacific legal department, and voila — permission was granted.

Preserving a legacy

So many amusement parks have vanished from the American scene that Joel Styer, a consummate fan from Reading, Pa., created a Web site a little more than 10 years ago to keep their history alive.

For family owned parks, the challenge is to be able to serve up what the public wants and adapt as times change.

Rob Norris, scion of a carousel-building family and president of Seabreeze Park in upstate New York, is impressed by the way the Canfields have preserved the traditional Boardwalk setting in Santa Cruz.

"I have visited it a couple of times and it remains one of my favorites," he said. "We have a great site on Lake Ontario for our 128-year-old park but if I was to trade locations with any other park, it would certainly be on the shores of Monterey Bay."

With travel and tourism now the third largest industry in the United States, Norris sees opportunities for younger family members who want to carry on the family park tradition.

"Family owned parks can adapt policies, fine tune their offerings and add attractions without big corporate oversight," he said. "We are not governed by Wall Street's reaction to the next quarter."

Canfield made a similar observation: "The corporate philosophy doesn't always work."

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CHARLES CANFIELD

Case in point: Descendents of the founder of Lake Compounce in Connecticut sold in the mid-1980s to the Hershey Corp., which bailed out after two years.

The park was taken over in 1996 by a professional management company that has invested more than \$50 million in new rides, attractions and improvements. This year, Lake Compounce is open for its 161st season, retaining its title as the nation's oldest amusement park.

At the Boardwalk, Canfield's son Tom has worked in nearly every department and currently oversees maintenance and operations. Like his father and grandfather, he is a member of Rotary Club. He's also on the Boys and Girls Club board.

Asked about a succession plan, he said, "I would love to have the opportunity. I would hope I'd be ready."

Tom's sister Jennifer is married and pursuing a career in hotel hospitality outside Santa Cruz, but family ties may lure her home.

"There's not a lot of movement here in the company," Tom explained. "If the opportunity arose, she'd love to come back."

Charles Canfield sees value in providing a family entertainment venue by the seashore even as times change. Asked if the Boardwalk can last another 100 years, he is optimistic.

"I think it can," he said. "People always need some kind of escape."

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THE CANFIELD FAMILY TREE

