

**The cultural and physical evolution of the American amusement park: From
Thompson & Dundy's *A Trip to the Moon* to Walt Disney's *Space Mountain*.**

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Dedication



In 1984 I first visited Disneyland. This dissertation is a way of trying to make sense of it all. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the invaluable guidance, wit and wisdom of Dr John Wills and the unstinting support and unending proof reading of my wife Diana for accompanying me on this ride.

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Section 1: Introduction



“The amusement park was a “temporary world within the ordinary world,” where “special rules” obtained and visitors literally stepped out of their “real” lives into a world of play and make believe.”¹

The ambition of this dissertation is to explain the phenomenal growth and development of the American amusement park in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It will endeavour to highlight how the millions of new immigrants to the United States of America and its standing population discovered innovative, technologically driven ways, in these fledgling public, urban and commercial spaces, in which to amuse themselves.

Dale Samuelson, in his introduction to *The American Amusement Park*, states that the central reason behind the phenomenal success of the American amusement park in the early part of the twentieth century was,

¹ David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 86.

“More than anything, I think it’s the appeal to the senses. The visual design and sense of motion – the sound of laughter, music, screams, of joy/fright, and mechanical whirs, screeches, and bells – the feel of the padded bar in your hands, or your stomach trying to escape through your throat – the smell of French fries and cotton candy – the taste of vanilla swirled with chocolate – these are the things that we remember. These are the things, in fact, that makes these memories unforgettable. This is the magic of the American amusement park.”²

This dissertation will strive to understand more fully this “appeal to the senses” and how the recently arrived immigrants adapted to experiencing and enjoying fabricated public fun. It will investigate and research the causes behind just how the amusement park became such a phenomenon of American popular culture in the early decades of the twentieth century. It will also review the social and economic conditions that were extant from the late 19th century through to the 1970’s, seeking to explain how amusement parks became so successful and the manner in which amusement parks influenced just how the American population spent its valuable leisure time and money.

There is a paucity of academic research both from a strictly historiographical approach and also from a popular culture standpoint into the American amusement park. This naturally leaves areas that are less well

² Dale Samuelson and Wendy Yegoians, *The American Amusement Park* (St Paul, Minnesota: MBI Publishing, 2001), p. 7.

investigated and academically researched and analysed. This is, of course, an opportunity and a challenge for this dissertation. Some of the market data is very difficult to access and even some of the most important books are now out of print and beyond the reach of academic libraries. One such book is William Mangels' *The Outdoor Amusement Industry* published by Vantage Press in 1952. Even the European branch of the IAAPA (International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions) the leading global trade organisation, did not have access to a copy. A by-product of this dearth of market and industry data is confirmed in this dissertation taking a far more qualitative approach than a quantitative approach to the subject. This has led the dissertation to use, where available, reference sources such as newspapers and journals as well as first-hand visitor experience recollections as the primary materials of investigation. The challenge for this dissertation is the opportunity to research underdeveloped areas such as detailed case histories of individual parks to define their identities but also to show that not all amusement parks were the same, as academic writers such as like King, Nye and Weinstein appear to believe.

Within the canon of academic writings on the amusement park industry there are basically two main and very different narrative schools. First, there are books written by local historians and academics on their own local amusement parks. Examples of this school are David and Diane DeMali Francis' *Cedar Point*, Jim Futrell's *Amusement Parks of New Jersey*, John F. Kasson's *Amusing The Millions* and Alan A. Siegel's *Smile A Picture Book Of Olympic Park*. Many of

these books fall into the style of homages to lost youth and in this dissertation's view lack the academic rigour in fully analysing the cultural and social significance of their local amusement parks. Alternatively there are a limited number of academic books and articles written by cultural observers and historians on the amusement park industry that address the industry as a whole. The leading exponent of this school is Judith A. Adams's excellent book *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills*. Other writers that fall into this school are Margaret J. King, Raymond M. Weinstein and Russel B. Nye. The key problem with this second broad brush approach is that its writers tend to generalise and coalesce the amusement parks and this robs the narratives of the individual distinct local identities. Indeed Margaret J. King called these writers "generalists."³ The intention of this dissertation is for it to be a hybrid of these two distinct narrative approaches. The dissertation's goal is to first rigorously research and analyse the historical context of the amusement park industry and then to compare these findings with detailed case histories of individual parks. Using this hybrid approach provides the dissertation with the ability to identify the industry's touchpoints but also isolate the exceptions to the academic axioms.

There is an academic temptation to corral amusement parks into an amorphous whole, ghettoised entertainment, with a homogenous hoorah. This was

³ Margaret J. King, 'The New American Muse: Notes on the Amusement /Theme Park', *Journal of Popular Culture*, Summer 1981, pp. 56-62.

an understandable approach by academic writers Judith A. Adams *The American Amusement Park Industry. A History of Technology And Thrills*, Russel B. Nye's *Eight Ways Of Looking at an Amusement Park*, John Hannigan's *Fantasy City: Pleasure and Profit in the Postmodern Metropolis* and David Nasaw's *Going Out: The Rise of Public Entertainment*. The evidence shows, however, that the parks had very distinct characters and this dissertation will use detailed case history examples of individual parks to highlight some of these key differences.

Initially one of the first challenges is to denote a start point for the country's mechanised amusement park. Up to the late nineteenth century amusement for the masses in North America had worn an elitist mask of classical culture and refinement. Museums, theatres, concert halls and galleries were all sponsored by the wealthy for their own use and importantly for the education and edification of the working class. The reality was that the masses ultimately desired to throw off this passive cultural pretence and replace it with George Tilyou's bizarre laughing trademark facemask, made famous as the entranceway to Steeplechase Park to essentially have fun. According to Kasson, Tilyou's facemask, represented,

“A grotesque, vaguely diabolic jester, it served as a fitting image for Steeplechase: a promise of the irresponsible hilarity visitors hoped to experience within.”⁴

⁴ John F. Kasson, *Amusing The Millions* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 60.

The “New American” immigrants of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century wanted more visceral entertainments than those provided by the upper classes, ones based on carnival and conviviality and ones with which they could interact. The early amusement parks were designed for active participation and for visitors to be able to behave in a manner that was unlike that of their everyday working lives. In a 1953 article in the *Hollywood Reporter*, Darryl F. Zanuck, the noted film producer, made a point regarding the difference between entertainment and recreation. He believed recreation was an activity you participated in and entertainment was something others provided for you.⁵

The amusement park provided visitors with the unique opportunity to become more than simple spectators. It gave them permission to have agency and become part of the spectacle. Early American amusement parks were a point in question. Active participation by the visitor to the amusement park was essential to enjoy the essence of the experience that cultural innovators such as George Tilyou, Paul Boyton or Frederic Thompson at Coney Island conceived and constructed. Could their landscapes have been called “recreation parks”? Possibly, yet members of the outdoor movements such as hikers, campers, hunters, canoeists and climbers had already claimed that collective name, long before the advent of the modern American amusement park.

⁵ Hollywood Reporter, 'Entertainment vs Recreation', *Hollywood Reporter*, 26 October 1953.

Many factors affect the boundaries of this dissertation. As with the circuitous nature of the rides themselves drawing a linear time and development line is problematic if not misleading. According to Margaret J. King the topic of the amusement park is “obvious yet unseen, omnipresent yet unexamined,” she goes on to say that the call to the popular culture scholar is “to question and observe, answer and analyse.”⁶ The arguments and topics have as many twists and turns as the helter-skelter and reach as many highs and lows as that of a roller coaster. It is therefore important to try to rationalize the thesis and to compartmentalize the topics and arguments.

The second section of the dissertation will introduce the thesis and outline the dissertation’s overall intentions and ambitions. In doing this it will attempt to signpost the future direction of the dissertation.

The third section is a short review of the demographic influences on the development of the amusement park industry, a key factor in their rise and fall during the twentieth century. The development of the American amusement park was not an instance of build it and they will come but much more an example of the new immigrants being already in the country, working hard, and needing the necessary facilities to enjoy their limited leisure time. Consumer demand not availability defined the growth in the number of the amusement parks.

⁶ Margaret J. King, 'The New American Muse: Notes on the Amusement /Theme Park', *Journal of Popular Culture*, Summer 1981, pp. 56-62.

The fourth section looks at the three broad product life stages of the amusement park industry – introduction, boom and decline. The urban-based expositions, particularly the Pan Columbian Exposition of 1893, The Pan American Exposition of 1902 and Coney Island’s three amusement parks are the main exemplars that are used to investigate the notional three phases in the product cycle of the American amusement park. The first phase covers the nascent period of the city-based expositions of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, defined by this dissertation as the Inchoate Age. The second phase explores the amusement parks flourishing zenith throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century, termed by many commentators, such as Jim Futrell’s *Amusement Parks of New York*⁷ as did Carroll Pursell in her article in *Icons*⁸ as the “Golden Age”. The iconic ride, Thompson and Dundy’s *A Trip To The Moon* was extant over these first two phases of the American amusement park industry. Finally the third phase reviews the period post the 1929 stock market crash, The Age Of Decline that continued up to the introduction of the newly marketed concept of the theme park in the 1950’s.

The next three sections are detailed amusement park case histories, Olympic Park in New Jersey, Cedar Point in Sandusky Ohio and Knotts Berry Farm in Buena Park. They differ in terms of where they are located geographically,

⁷ Jim Futrell, *Amusement Parks of New York* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2006), p. 7.

⁸ Carroll Pursell, 'Fun Factories:Inventing American Amusement Parks', *Icon*, 19 (2013), pp. 75-99.

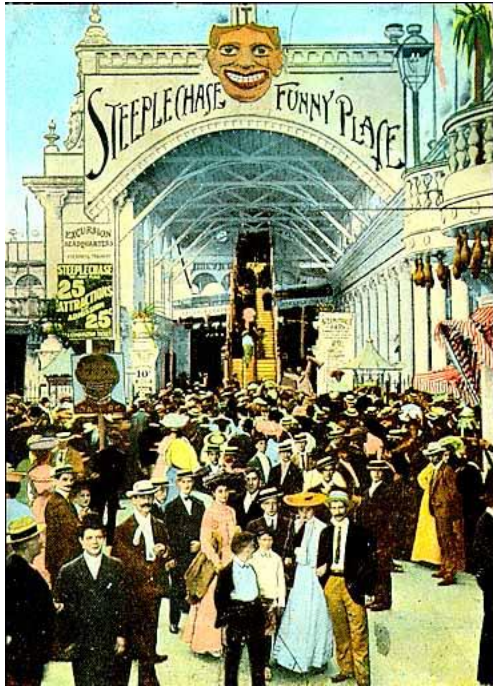
their origins, how they were managed and who were their target audiences. Using these disparate parks allowed the dissertation the means to show their important similarities and at the same time their significant differences.

This is followed by a short section on *Space Mountain* Disneyland, the end point of this dissertation's narrative arc. This dissertation is bookended by two rides, *A Trip to the Moon* a cyclorama launched at the Pan American Exposition in Buffalo New York in 1901 and *Space Mountain* which was introduced to Disneyland in 1977, both with very common intents but markedly different in their delivery. In many ways these two rides epitomize the technical development and progress of a society and its developing quest for fun in the amusement parks.

The final section of the dissertation offers some conclusions. In Margaret J. King's words "Examination must precede diagnosis."⁹ In less than one hundred years the amusement park industry had gone through a complete product lifecycle, from invention to boom, to decline and thence to a limited renaissance. To frame this dissertation it has been bookended by two major amusement park rides, Thompson and Dundy's *A Trip to the Moon* cyclorama and Walt Disney's *Space Mountain*. To set more fully the scope of the dissertation it is necessary to walk through one of the poet E. E. Cummings' most memorable phrases.

⁹ Margaret J. King, 'The New American Muse: Notes on the Amusement /Theme Park', *Journal of Popular Culture*, Summer 1981, pp. 56-62.

Section 2: What is the Scope of the Dissertation?



“Through dizzy gates of illusion.”¹⁰

E. E. Cummings

One of the central intents of this dissertation is to analyse and investigate the social, cultural and economic significance of the introduction and rapid development of the American amusement park on its society. Its scope will embrace the period from the late nineteenth century through to the introduction of *Space Mountain* in Disneyland in 1977. By defining this timeframe, it will be possible to review three key phases in this new American amusement industry. These three significant periods however do prove chronologically permeable as events do overlap between these distinct definitions.

¹⁰ E. E. Cummings, 'Coney Island Reader: Through Gates of Illusion', ed. by Louis J Parascandola and John Parascandola (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 91.

The first phase, The Inchoate Age, was in the period of the city-based exhibitions and entertainments of the late nineteenth century experienced mainly in the Expositions. It is in this period where one first encounters the *Midways* proper. In David Nasaw's view,

“The cities of joy that arose at the world's fair sites crystallized visions of the harmonious relationship that could be established between commerce and amusements in urban settings. The fairs induced temporary fits of frivolity among ordinary sober Americans, transforming them into sports and spenders.”¹¹

The second phase, the Golden Age, was the period of phenomenal growth in the numbers of amusement parks from the final years of the 19th century up to end of 1929. According to Judith A. Adams, the importance of this huge period of growth is reflected in the attendance figures of the new amusement parks,

“The year 1910 marked Coney Island's high point as an amusement mecca [...] A good Sunday crowd could approach a million people. In 1920, however, the subway extended to the area, making Coney accessible to the masses for only a nickel. The millions turned into tens of millions of visitors who demanded amusement at subway prices.”¹²

¹¹ David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 78-79.

¹² Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p. 56.

The third and almost inevitable phase, The Age of Decline, was the amusement park industry's period of catastrophic contraction in the face of a crippling domestic and world economic recession. Jim Futrell observes how,

“With unemployment peaking at 33 percent consumers had little money to spend on entertainment, let alone a day at an amusement park.”¹³

Although this is an overestimate of the overall unemployment levels (official figures put maximum unemployment levels at the 1933 of 24.9 percent for the Great Depression) Futrell still offers a valid observation as to how hard the amusement parks were hit during this period.

This dissertation will not cover in detail the period of recovery for the American amusement park, The Age of Renaissance, from 1955 onwards, when the amusement park was faced with the challenge of the introduction of the purportedly new “Theme Park” concept championed by Walt Disney. It will however address the issue of the introduction of *Space Mountain* as a repackaged thrill ride in 1977, to highlight the enormous technical developments and progress within the American amusement park industry and how significantly the industry had changed from the participant having agency to the participant becoming far more passive in their interaction with the ride.

¹³ Jim Futrell, *Amusement Parks of New York* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2006), p. 8.

The United States amusement park industry was inherently financially unstable. As early as 1909, during the industry's early Golden Age period, *Billboard*, the entertainment industry's leading trade magazine, highlighted its editorial view regarding the lack of sustainability of this fledgling industry,

“ The great profits made by some of the park men produce a mania for park building, which can be compared to some of the booms in mining camps. Men from almost all professions of life flock to this endeavour and without knowledge or particular ability in this line endeavoured to build parks.”¹⁴

By 1913 the omens for the industry had apparently not improved. *World's Work* magazine described the meteoric development of amusement parks as “hysteria of growth followed by a panic.”¹⁵ Even at the height of the industry's Golden Age it was evident that the amusement park industry lacked a solid business base. In many ways this was possibly unsurprising for an industry that relied heavily on sustained periods of such an unreliable commodity such as sunshine for a large part of its financial success. Many historians such as Kasson, Futrell and Kyriazi cite inclement weather as a major contributor to success or failure of individual parks. The speculative nature of a business that relied heavily on constant

¹⁴ Jim Futrell, *Amusement Parks of New Jersey* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2004), p. 8.

¹⁵ Jim Futrell, *Amusement Parks of New Jersey* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2004), p. 8.

reimagining and reinvestment for a fickle visitor proved eventually to be too much for many amusement park owners to encompass.

For the industry's three phases of development, this dissertation will investigate how leisure time for the masses, which had long been in the purview of the elite, evolved from one based on classical education and the appreciation of classic culture to one where the working-class masses had agency, involvement and engagement with their new leisure activities. In this manner the amusement park becomes a metaphor for the changing social and economic structures of the country. This leisure revolution represented a fundamental change, from a country striving for a secular classical position, William Bradford's seventeenth century utopian Christian beacon, "cittie on a hill,"¹⁶ transformed to one where technology and entrepreneurial vision were the new beacons of what was to become the country's leading economic mantra, progress. John Kasson in 1978 wrote,

"Changing economic and social conditions helped to create the basis of a new mass culture, which would gradually emerge in the first decades of the twentieth century. At the turn of the century this culture was still in the process of formation and not fully incorporated into the life of society as a whole. Its purest expression at this time lay in the realm of commercial amusements, which were creating symbols of the

¹⁶ William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620 - 1647*, ed. by Samuel Eliot Morison (New York: Knopf, 1952), p. 62.

new cultural order, helping to knit a heterogeneous audience into a cohesive whole. Nowhere were these symbols and their relationship to the new mass audience more clearly revealed than at turn of the century Coney Island.”¹⁷

In the broadest terms, as immigration increased the working masses became far more heterogeneous, more diverse and clung onto Old World customs of carnival, fetes and fairs. Simultaneously there developed a cohort of mainly immigrant amusement park pioneers, many of them from German heritage. These innovators were prepared to break with the “education of the masses” classical traditions, promoted by the elite and went on to develop entertainments of less educational ‘value’, but which were far more fun, popular, inclusive and family orientated.

The new mass audience interacted with the American amusement park across differing classes, genders, and ages and to a point racial heritage in a completely different manner to how they had experienced leisure activities in the past. The parks represented the social and economic norms of the times yet there were instances where this adherence to the norms were challenged and broken. The mixing of class, age and gender was far more fluid in the amusement park than in everyday society. On any detailed examination of its constituency, conscious racism is difficult to perceive within the American amusement park

¹⁷ John F. Kasson, *Amusing The Millions* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 4.

with one main exception and that was against African- Americans. From the very beginnings of the amusement park, as with everyday life in the United States, the African-American was ridiculed and segregated. Even at the World's Columbian Exposition, they were discriminated against with special black only entrance days for both the *White City* and the *Midway* where the organisers crassly provided free water melons to the crowds.¹⁸ A close inspection of a number of amusement park photographic archives will yield very few, if any, positive images of a black person or family enjoying a visit to an amusement park prior to the Civil Liberties Bill of the 1960's. It took until the late 1950's and 1960's for organisations like the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) to challenge legally and through direct action, admittance to the country's amusement parks. In the later detailed case histories on Olympic Park in New Jersey, Cedar Point in Ohio and Knotts Berry Farm in this dissertation the detailed everyday impact of racial exclusion and stereotyping is further examined.

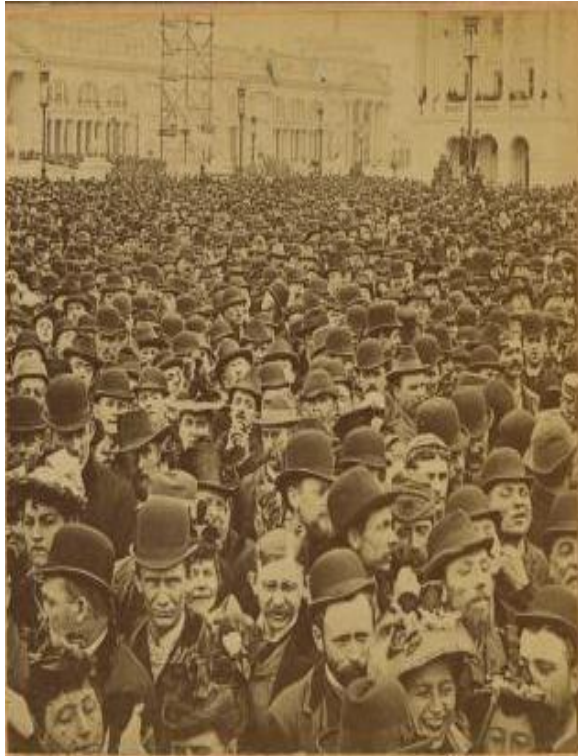
This in-depth analysis of Olympic Park, Cedar Point and Knotts Berry Farm provides the dissertation with the ability to be able to investigate a range of issues that affected American amusement parks in microcosm. What were the amusement park's points of difference? What were the park's origins and how did they develop? Were all amusement parks fundamentally the same? How important was accessibility to the success of the parks? How important were the

¹⁸ David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 77.

rides and the importance of electricity and its supply for the new technological rides? Where did food fit into the park experience and how important was it to the visitor? How important was a visionary owner to an amusement park? Why was a park's locational juxtaposition next to water seemingly important? Were the amusement parks centres of social engineering? Why did some amusement parks fail, and others succeed?

One of the key elements in the development of the American amusement park was the requirement for scale. The amusement parks required vast numbers of people, each person spending their precious leisure time and money to justify the huge capital costs of building restaurants, developing rides, introducing ornate bathhouses and landscaping exotic gardens and architecture. People as free-spending consumers were the prime motive force and amusement parks needed millions of them to succeed.

Section 3: United States Population Dynamics



“The rise of public amusements was an expansion of the cities. Commercial entertainments were, in this period at least, an urban phenomenon. Their rise and fall were inevitably and inextricably linked to the fortunes of the cities that sustained them.”¹⁹

The growth in size and numbers of the new American industrialised cities was driven by the absolute increases in population levels and the labour demands of the fledgling industries. Without the scale of immigration and the way it coalesced around major urban industry centres the American amusement park would have been unsustainable and indeed the amusement park industry could never have flourished.

The chart below displays the raw data of the United States of America’s population explosion.

¹⁹ David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 3.

Total United States Population Growth 1870-1950

Decade Ending	Millions	Decade on Decade Millions	Percentage Increase
1870	38.6		
1880	50.2	+11.6	+30.1
1890	62.9	+12.8	+25.5
1900	76.0	+13.0	+20.7
1910	92.0	+16.0	+21.0
1920	105.7	+13.7	+14.9
1930	122.8	+17.1	+16.1
1940	131.7	+8.9	+7.2
1950	150.7	+19.0	+14.5

Sources: US Census Bureau Decennial Census Publications /

www.demographicchartbook.com

KEY: The Inchoate Age The Golden Age The Age of Decline

Throughout the periods of invention, growth and recession of the American amusement park the population of the country actually grew in double figures for every decade with the exception of the 1930's, which still grew, but only in single digits. The working masses were there to be entertained as well as to work. The migrants had moved from the European and North American countryside where rural communities had learned to entertain themselves to the nation's burgeoning towns and cities where there was a lack of cohesive community identity and no viable mass provision for their amusement. This was an immense population revolution, yet statistics sometimes mask the realities. Whist the decade upon

decade growth was truly phenomenal the key point is that from 1870 to 1900 and then again from 1900 to 1950 the population of the country actually doubled in size. Regionally the differences were even further exaggerated. In the 1900's the Eastern States still dominated over the West of the country, beyond the Ohio River was still sparsely populated. Frederick Allen stated,

“Not only would the thinness of the Western population remind you how much further East, in those days, was the centre of gravity of American industry and American cultural institutions.”²⁰

United States Rural and Urban Population Percentages

	Rural Millions	Urban Millions
1880	71.8	28.2
1890	64.9	35.1
1900	60.3	39.7
1910	54.3	45.7
1920	48.8	51.2
1930	43.8	56.2
1940	43.5	56.5
1950	41.0	59.0

Sources: US Census Bureau Decennial Census Publications

www.demographicchartbook.com

KEY: The Inchoate Age The Golden Age The Age of Decline

²⁰ Frederick Lewis Allen, *The Big Change 1900-1950* (New York: Bantam Books, 1965).Frederick Lewis Allen, p 9.

The population of the United States was changing the economy of the United States from one of a rural subsistence basis to one of urban consumer driven predominance. By the 1920's more people lived in urban locations than in the countryside. David Nasaw observes,

“Between 1870 and 1900, real income for non-farm employees increased by more than 50 percent while the cost of living, as measured by the consumer price index, decreased by 50 percent.”²¹

The towns and cities of the United States grew rapidly in number and size providing the new industrial manufacturing industries with crucial levels of workers with which to forge progress. The following chart outlines the number of locations with more than 2,500 people doubling between 1870 and 1890, it then doubles again between 1890 and 1920 and then virtually doubles once again between 1910 and 1950. This concentration of the booming population figures created an ideal canvas for potential amusement park innovators and entrepreneurs.

²¹ David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 4.

Number of Places in the United States with 2,500 inhabitants or more

1870	663
1880	939
1890	1348
1900	1737
1910	2262
1920	2722
1930	3165
1940	3464
1950	4023

Sources: US Census Bureau Decennial Census Publications /

www.demographicchartbook.com

KEY: The Inchoate Age The Golden Age The Age of Decline

During the 1890's there had been an economic downturn, yet the immigrant masses still continued to arrive, mainly from Europe. Whilst these growth figures were staggering in absolute terms, their real significance is seen in some of the sector growths. Government Census data investigated by Alba M. Edwards displays the beginnings of a hugely important population subset for the early development of the American amusement park, the beginnings of a monied middle class.²²

²² Alba M. Edwards, *Sixteen Census Reports: Comparative Occupation Statistics for the United States, 1879-1940* (Washington, District of Columbia: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1943), p. 91 110 112 119 121.

In 1880 there had been just 5,000 typists and stenographers in the country. By 1910 this figure had soared to over 300,000. In overall terms, clerical staff rose from 160,000 to 1.7 million over the same period and by 1920 represented a massive 24 percent of the total workforce, many of them women living in cities. David Nasaw continues, “The city’s white-collar workers were the most avid consumers of the commercial pleasures.”²³ Edward Tilyou observed that factory girls “pretended they were stenographers and private secretaries for the day.”²⁴ There was an eagerly anticipating audience for amusement and entertainment. The city-based expositions were part of the solution but Edward Tilyou continues that the paying public were ready to,

“Cut loose from repressions and restrictions and act pretty much as they feel like acting-since everyone else is doing the same thing.”²⁵

The cities were the engine in the development of the American economy and its amusement park industry. It was not long before most major American conurbations had at least one, if not more, amusement parks. Yet this “gold rush” style of uncontrolled growth would finally prove to be the undoing of many parks following the unregulated boom years of the first three decades of the twentieth century. The economic depression of the 1930’s that resulted in huge numbers of amusement park closures was partly to blame. Those amusement parks that were

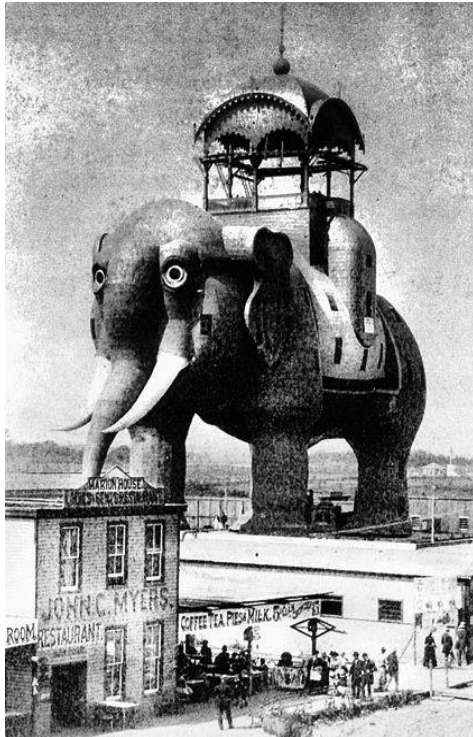
²³ David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 5.

²⁴ Edward F. Tilyou, 'Human Nature with the Brakes Off - Or: Why the Scoolma'am Walked Into The Sea', *America Magazine*, July 1922, p. 19.

²⁵ John F. Kasson, *Amusing The Millions* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 59.

managed with vision and with enormous levels of re-investment survived. Others were sometimes fortunate due to unique circumstances as is detailed in the case histories contained later in this dissertation. To investigate the development of this industry in the earlier described, orderly linear approach, this dissertation will now address the first period of its development that spanned the city based urban expositions in Chicago and New York through to the beginnings of George Tilyou's Steeplechase Park on Coney Island.

Section 4:1 The Inchoate Age



“The American amusement park has evolved from 19th century sylvan parks at the end of trolley lines and raucous midways in urban settings to the enclosed precisely planned and engineered theme park.”²⁶

Judith A. Adams

The American amusement park’s antecedence was in the fetes, festivals and fairs of Europe where many of the elements of the contemporary American amusement parks would originate. Gary Kyriazi observes that,

“ Whilst the amusement park originated in Europe, America must receive most of the credit for the rapid development and growth of the amusement park industry.”²⁷

In London’s Vauxhall Gardens in the nineteenth century, on the banks of the River Thames, aristocracy mixed with the hoi palloi where, according to Judith

²⁶ Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p. xiii.

²⁷ Gary Kyriazi, *The Great American Amusement Parks A Pictorial History* (New Jersey: Castle Books, 1976), p. 15.

A. Adams, "... a one shilling night on 2 August 1833 drew 27,000 visitors."²⁸ The gardens had scale. They provided food and drink, and spectacular firework displays were a part of the nightly entertainment. However, these forms of entertainment were not solely an English experience. The Prater in Vienna had opened in 1766 and the Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen in August 1843. The latter has long been thought to be one of Walt Disney's key inspirations for Disneyland. Judith A. Adams sets the start date for the modern American amusement park as being the World Columbian Exposition of 1893. She ultimately selected this exposition, as it was the site of the first American, power driven, mechanised ride, the *Pleasure wheel*. This was later to become known as the eponymous '*Ferris Wheel*.' In academic analysis alternative launch events could possibly have been set, Central Park's mule driven carousel introduced in 1871 or the 1870 Mauch Chunk switchback railway. According to Robert Cartmell, the huge popularity of this second example, the scenic switchback ride from the coalmine on the summit of Mount Pisgah down to the supply canal, is reflected in its 1873 visitor estimate of 35,000 riders, who converged on this converted industrial site for the purpose of fun.

This phase of exhibitions and expositions coincided with the end of the American era known as the "Gilded Age" and the beginning of the "Progressive Period" for the country. This was a nation still recovering from the ravages of a

²⁸ Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p. 6.

bitter civil war and grappling with the inequalities and iniquities of the Reconstruction Period. The nation's governments were looking for ways of positively promoting itself both domestically and internationally and the urban-based exposition was a major part of this rebuilding strategy.

Two of the expositions proved to be especially pivotal in the development of the modern American amusement park and George Tilyou, Steeplechase Park's inspirational founder, was involved with and influenced by both events. The first was the World Columbian Exposition of 1893 with its towering engineering marvel created by George Washington Gale Ferris and the second was the Pan-American Exposition of 1901 where George Tilyou first encountered Frederic Thompson's and Elmer 'Skip' Dundy's *A Trip to the Moon* cyclorama. Both events are crucial to understanding and appreciating the early development of the American amusement park.

The World Columbian Exposition Chicago 1893

It was at this event that powered mechanical technology was introduced and utilised to elicit purely fun, wonder and enjoyment with the introduction of George Washington Gale Ferris' eponymous steam driven mechanised wheel. The intention was to rival the global admiration and news media coverage of the recently constructed, Eiffel Tower, which had been unveiled to enormous public acclaim at the Paris Exposition of 1889.

The *Ferris wheel* stood 264 feet above ground with 36 cars each carrying 60 people, a total of 2,160 people per revolution. It stood in the middle of the

newly introduced *Midway Plaisance*, a place of fun and enjoyment set apart from the more worthy and Victorian influenced main *White City* exposition that extolled and represented the virtues of classical culture, education, the contemporary advancement of science and technology, improvements in medicine and the importance of industry and commerce in the creation of a world leading economy. Judith A. Adams' wrote,

“Although the planners and managers of the World’s Columbian Exposition intended from the start to include an amusement and concession area, as the grand plans developed the placing of vulgar amusements in proximity to the serene and aristocratic Court of Honor seemed out of the question. The solution was to segregate the rowdy “entertainment” concession to an outlying strip, nearly a mile long and 600 feet wide...The Midway Plaisance, as the strip became known, provided the generic name for all succeeding amusement sections of expositions and parks, the *Midway*.”²⁹

The *Midway Plaisance* took its name from the existing Chicago park site on which the exposition’s entertainment area was built and which was originally landscaped by Paul Cornell in 1850. It was a shady, sylvan spot ironically designated for the more elite strata of Chicago’s ruling classes to while away their

²⁹ Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1991), pp. 28-29.

leisure time rather than for the working masses. The original site is still recognisable today within the campus of Chicago University.

The elitist and high cultural aspirations of the World's Columbian Exposition were housed in its magnificent *White City* constructed of a plaster like material called "staff" which was composed of "powdered gypsum, alumina, glycerine, and dextrine all mixed with fibres."³⁰ It was an incredibly flexible and creative material that allowed architects and designers to cheaply create massive monuments, buildings and statuary. Francis Millet was Decorations Director for the exposition, and he recognised the importance of 'staff,'

"It permitted them, in fact, to indulge in an architectural spree...of a magnitude never before attempted; it made it possible to make a colossal sketch of a group of buildings which no autocrat and no government could ever have carried out in permanent form; it left them free, finally, to reproduce with fidelity and accuracy the best details of ancient architecture, to erect temples, colonnades, towers and domes of surpassing beauty and of noble proportions."³¹

This was the material that the elite opinion formers, politicians and businessmen believed would make solid William Bradford's seventeenth-century prediction of the United States becoming a secular, beacon nation like a "cittie on

³⁰ David Burg, *Chicago's White City of 1893* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1976), p. 152.

³¹ David Burg, *Chicago's White City of 1893* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1976), p. 152.

a hill.”³² This fragile, white material however aged, discoloured, disintegrated and deteriorated rapidly under the prevailing Illinois weather. This decay is an abiding metaphor for the elitist ambitions of educating the masses rather than entertaining them. The real technical innovations of the new American manufacturing and industrial revolution at the exposition were concealed and covered in a glaze of white, classical camouflage and conceit. The genesis of the incandescent lit amusement park was not, however, based on a secular utopian representation of perfection as Judith A. Adams writes,

“Very early on in our history, however, the road to perfection veered away from spiritual grace toward technology as saviour and utopian engineer.”³³

The temporary and glossy nature of “staff” did however form part of the template material for the exterior architectural extremes of many American amusement parks. Its temporary nature fitted perfectly with the ever-changing nature of the amusement parks themselves. To financially survive the parks had to evolve seasonally with new rides and sideshows being introduced every year and older rides being repositioned, rebranded and repurposed. To be able to afford to do this a cheap material with built in obsolescence, like “staff, “was the perfect solution for the park owners.

³² William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620 - 1647*, ed. by Samuel Eliot Morison (New York: Knopf, 1952), p. 62.

³³ Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p. xiii.

Technology, money and a visionary mind led early amusement park entrepreneurs to develop new ways of entertaining the masses away from the more elitist classical strategies. The driving force in the development of the amusement park was not the worthy school of thought of social reformers such as William Dean Howells or Frederick Law Olmsted with their creeds of education, religion, literature and artistic appreciation for the working classes. According to John F. Kasson “Genteel cultural reformers never achieved the control they sought, a fact they readily acknowledged.”³⁴ Howells was initially astounded by the “incomparably vast” *Ferris wheel* but later condemned it as “a money-making contrivance.”³⁵ According to Dale Samuelson,

“What Olmsted failed to see, or at least chose to ignore was that Americans had been working hard for four hundred years: now they wanted to play.”³⁶

In the *Midway Plaisance* area was, what prominent American Studies Professor Richard Nye called, “the germ of the modern amusement park.”³⁷ John F. Kasson describes the exhilarating experience,

“Fairgoers threaded their way on foot or in hired chairs among a hurly-burly of exotic attractions: mosques and pagoda, Viennese streets and

³⁴ John F. Kasson, *Amusing The Millions* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 5.

³⁵ William Dean Howells, *Letters of an Altrurian Traveller: The Altrurian Romances* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 206.

³⁶ Dale Samuelson and Wendy Yegoians, *The American Amusement Park* (St Paul, Minnesota: MBI Publishing, 2001), p. 12.

³⁷ Russell B. Nye, 'Eight Ways Of Looking At An Amusement Park', *Journal Of Popular Culture*, 1981, 65.

Turkish bazaars, South Sea island huts, Irish and German castles, and Indian tepees.”³⁸

The area could not have been more different from the exposition’s classically influenced *White City*. In the *Midway* the attractions were multifarious and bizarre in the extreme. The everyday was mixed with almost magical mysteriousness. David Nasaw writes that the only attraction to make more money than the iconic *Ferris wheel* was the “torso wiggling dancer Fahreda Mazhar, more commonly known as “Little Egypt, the Darling of the Nile.”³⁹ She became the original “hoochie coochie” girl and typified a freeing of Victorian morals but at the expense of the objectification of women. Fahreda was later to also become a major attraction at George Tilyou’s Steeplechase Park on Coney Island.

George Tilyou had married Mary O’Donnell in 1893 and had honeymooned at the World Columbian Exposition where he combined business with pleasure, enjoying the exposition whilst searching for attractions for his developing amusement park in Coney Island. The originally named “*Pleasure wheel*” soon to become known as the *Ferris wheel* was a natural attraction for a man who was influenced by the sheer magnitude of the ride and the potential profits to be gained from this technological wonder. It is estimated that the Wheel carried more than 1.5 million visitors each eagerly paying 50 cents for the

³⁸ John F. Kasson, *Amusing The Millions* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 24.

³⁹ David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 68.

privilege. Tilyou engaged in a futile chase for the attraction yet it had already been pre-sold to the Louisiana Purchase Exhibition of 1904. Undaunted he returned to his nascent New York amusement park and erected a non-too truthful sign proclaiming, “On This Site Will Be Erected the World’s Largest Ferris Wheel.” He in fact constructed a much smaller “pleasure wheel” of just 125 foot in diameter with just 12 cars each holding 18 passengers.

The demise of the original wheel is, in fact, shrouded in mystery, even though it was recognised as the financial saviour of the whole exposition. Jamie Malawski of *The Smithsonian Magazine* states,

“But when the fair gates closed, Ferris became immersed in a tangle of wheel-related lawsuits about debts he owed suppliers and that the fair owed him. In 1896, bankrupt and suffering from typhoid fever, he died at age 37.”⁴⁰

The World Columbian Exposition ended in October 1893 and the wheel closed in April 1894 and was dismantled and put into storage until 1895. It was then rebuilt on Chicago’s North Side, near Lincoln Park, next to an exclusive neighbourhood. It operated there from October 1895 until 1903, when it was again dismantled and transported by rail to St. Louis for the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exhibition and was finally destroyed by controlled demolition using two hundred pounds of dynamite on 11 May 1906. The final piece of unusual

⁴⁰ Jamie Malawski, 'Smithsonian Museum', in *Smithsonian Magazine* < [HYPERLINK "www.smithsonianmag.com" www.smithsonianmag.com](http://www.smithsonianmag.com) > [accessed 25 April 2019]

synchronicity between the Columbian Exposition and the modern amusement park is that Elias Disney, the father of Roy and Walt, worked as a carpenter at the exposition. Walt Disney's older brother Roy, who was to become the financial innovator of the future entertainment empire, was born in Chicago during the exposition and was reputedly close to being christened Columbus in the exposition's honour. The second key amusement park influencer was the New York based exposition of 1901.

The Pan American Exposition Buffalo New York 1901

As noted earlier in this dissertation, regarding the permeability of the three defined phases of the development of the American amusement parks, the 1903 Pan American Exposition in Buffalo New York was, in fact, at the very start of the Golden Age yet it fits more coherently into this analysis of The Inchoate Age.

Once again George Tilyou is evident at this exposition and this is where he confirms his position as a formative pioneer of the American amusement park industry. Mark Binnitt, writing in the *Illustrated Guide to the Pan-American Exposition*, described the Midway as “a business street – the strangest in the world – where all business is pleasure.” Tilyou was fixated on business and was always looking for the attraction that captured the zeitgeist of its time and made money. Expositions were the ideal locations to find innovative creations where entertainment and commercialism converged. The Frederic Thompson and Elmer Dundy cyclorama *A Trip To The Moon* was one such attraction for Tilyou and his growing iconic entertainment centre, Steeplechase Park, on Coney Island.

Frederic Thompson was an architectural pioneer of Midway entertainment having been involved in Midway entertainment areas since Chicago in 1893. David Nasaw calls him a “genius” and Gary Kyriazi describes his *A Trip to the Moon* ride as “a perfect visual, auditory and physical illusion”⁴¹ while for John Hannigan it was “a participatory fantasy experience.”⁴² Thompson’s partnership with the financially astute Dundy ensured that their attraction was commercially a huge Pan-American Exposition success. So here, in what was to be known as the “Pan” area of the exhibition, he created an experience that was more than just a terrifying journey. He built on the hugely personal experiences of the new migrants in their recent passages across the Atlantic and took them onwards to Earth’s nearest satellite, the moon. This ride confirmed Thompson and Dundy’s position as the nation’s leading creative amusement park pioneers. All of this fantasy occurred at least two years before the Wright brothers had ever flown their first 120 feet at Kitty Hawk. Gary Kyriazi’s provides a vivid description of the experience of *A Trip to the Moon* and its unique attributes.

“*A Trip to the Moon* was housed in a large round building in the center of which was a large raised spaceship with flapping wings. Thirty passengers would board the ship and peer out of the portholes to the walls and floors of the room. After the captain’s countdown, projections

⁴¹ Gary Kyriazi, *The Great American Amusement Parks A Pictorial History* (New Jersey: Castle Books, 1976), p. 59.

⁴² John Hannigan, *Fantasy City: Pleasure and Profit in the Postmodern Metropolis* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 1998), p. 27.

against the walls and floor gave the illusion of a blastoff from the fairgrounds, passing over Niagara Falls, and on up into space, away from a shrinking Earth, while the ship itself swayed and gave a feeling of motion. After passing through an electric storm in space, the spaceship would approach the moon and cruise over its prairies, canyons, and craters before making a landing. The passengers would then debark and pass through underground caverns and passageways, inhabited by giants and midgets until they arrived at a grotto where the Man in the Moon sat on a throne, surrounded by dancing moon maidens. After a lunar welcome, the moon maidens escorted the group into a green room where they were reminded that the moon is made of green cheese, whereupon they would take bits of green cheese off the wall and offer them to the passengers. The passengers would then pass over a swaying bridge and emerge into the bright reality of the fair.”⁴³

The journey’s frightening similarity to the Atlantic thunderstorms and the strange and ominous disembarkation at Ellis Island with its complex immigration procedures to a land of “milk and honey” would certainly not have been lost on the riders. Thompson had bored deep into the psyche of the visitors and had constructed a perfect simulacrum for them, capturing perfectly the zeitgeist of the time. Here was a ride that required the riders to become

⁴³ Gary Kyriazi, *The Great American Amusement Parks A Pictorial History* (New Jersey: Castle Books, 1976), p. 58.

participants rather than spectators, to have agency with their leisure time and this was an approach that was to become a cornerstone of the modern American amusement park experience. George Tilyou with his equally attuned commercial entertainment antennae knew this only too well.

George Tilyou proposed a partnership with Thompson and Dundy to bring *A Trip to the Moon* cyclorama to his Coney Island Steeplechase Park. The deal was that Tilyou would take a minority share of 40 percent and the inventors 60 percent. With no other opportunity until the proposed 1904 St Louis Exposition, they agreed with alacrity. They were to become major innovators and pioneers of the Golden Age of American amusement parks in its iconic epicentre, Coney Island.

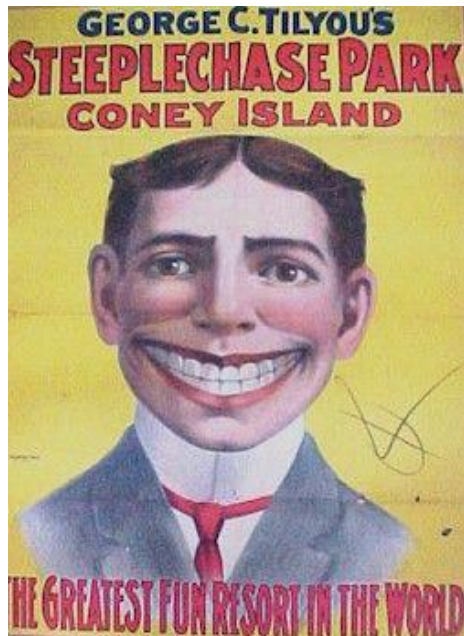
Coney Island was a place of abundance and moral latitude immortalised by the original Elephant Hotel erected in 1882 by James V. Lafferty. The symbol of an elephant became a commonplace amusement park mnemonic used throughout the early decades of the 20th century. Its use was however undermined by the fact that the hotel became notorious as a place of prostitution and casual sex with New Yorkers referring to “seeing the elephant”⁴⁴ as a thinly veiled sexual allusion.

This level of licentiousness was a challenge for the early Coney Island pioneers in transforming this “Sodom by the Sea” into a safe, family friendly

⁴⁴ John F. Kasson, *Amusing The Millions* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 33.

venue. It was a simple financial risk and reward question of developing an amusement area for the masses rather than for the deprived few. The sheer numbers and scale of visitors was key to Coney's success. Enclosure of the amusement rides into safe zones with self-policing and a controlled environment was crucial in the development of Coney Island into a global iconic entertainment venture. The Golden Age is defined in many ways by the two words, excess and abundance. Amusement parks were built right across the country, as many as, an estimated 2,000. There were vast numbers of visitors and the rapidly growing revenues for investors provided the parks with enormous market capitalisations. The amusement park's core product however was essentially fantasy and their financial rewards were also eventually found to be more illusory than real.

Section 4:2 The Golden Age



“Presenting convincing fantasy worlds within tiny park confines required consummate skill, artistic flair and a penchant for illusion.”⁴⁵

Karen Jones & John Wills

The above quote presents the challenge facing the early amusement park owners of just how to maximise their revenues and profits from very limited public spaces. The three enclosed fantasy amusement parks of Coney Island - Steeplechase Park, 15 acres, Luna Park, 22 acres and Dreamland, 15 acres – perfectly represent this concept of spatial compression. Peter Lyon states that, “Tilyou never said 15 acres; he preferred to say 655,000 square feet.”⁴⁶ These parks represent a perfect example with which to review the early days of the Golden Age of amusement parks as they set the bar for further parks across the country. This bigger is best approach confirms the conceit, engineered and promoted by the owners, especially Tilyou, that the entertainment they were

⁴⁵ Karen Jones and John Wills, *The Invention Of The Park: Recreational Landscapes From The garden Of Eden To Disney's Magic Kingdom* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), p. 99

⁴⁶ Peter Lyon, *Coney Island Reader: Through Gates of Illusion*, ed. by Louis J Parascandola and John Parascandola (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 99.

providing was on a vast, unparalleled scale. Coney Island's three amusement parks' actual total size was just 52 acres and only represented six percent of the acreage of Central Park and a third of the ultimate size of Disneyland when it launched in 1955. The truth is that few people even today could give an accurate estimate of the size of an acre. The traditional rural definition of an acre was an area that a horse and man could plough in a single day. To try to find a modern equivalent example, a modern English football pitch is 110 yards by 70 yards and is one and half acres in area in size. These were extremely small canvases for such fantastic creations. Here however there must be sounded a note of caution when viewing the estimated attendance levels to these relatively small fantasy zones. Judith A. Adams estimated that,

“ Coney continued to draw well over a million people a day on summer weekends in the early decades of the 20th century.”⁴⁷

Put simply Adams implies that all of these people visit one of the amusement parks on a weekend day and were not just visiting the Coney Island environs. If she were correct this would mean that the tiny 52 acres would have to accommodate a massive 19,320 visitors per acre on a single day. To attempt to put this estimate into a modern-day context, in 2017 the most densely populated place on Earth was Monaco with 68.5 people per acre and just 0.3 percent of Adam's Coney estimate. Central Park, on the latest visitor figures,

⁴⁷ Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p. 53.

attains 113 people per acre daily. Another way of looking at it is that a contemporary American Football field would have to accommodate over 25,000 people, that would equate to an impossible 2.3 square foot per person, to equal Adams' exaggerated estimate. During periods of astonishing growth, as was the case with Coney Island's amusement parks and with little substantiated visitor data, historians can be swept away by the speed and magnitude of the growth and some of the contemporary public relations hyperbole and do sometimes tend to talk in millions rather than more responsible thousands or even hundreds.

Perhaps a better way of estimating the visitor numbers is to return to *A Trip to the Moon* cyclorama, which opened in Steeplechase Park in 1902. According to Jim Futrell *A Trip to the Moon* attracted 875,000⁴⁸ visitors across its first 92-day season, an average total of 9,510 visitors per day and across the 15 acres Steeplechase Park, an estimated daily 634 visitors per acre. Assuming the visitors did not all turn up at the same time and were spread out over a twelve-hour opening period this would result in an estimate of 52.8 visitors per acre per hour. This estimate would appear to be a much more viable and believable attendance level for the amusement parks themselves. David Nasaw observes.

“That October in an article entitled ‘Balancing the Books of a Coney Island Season’ the *Times* concluded that ‘twenty million people had visited the island in the summer season just passed.’ The figures for

⁴⁸ Jim Futrell, *Amusement Parks of New York* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2006), p. 49.

other amusement parks were almost as spectacular, even assuming that the numbers disclosed to the press and the public were wildly exaggerated.”⁴⁹

A debate over the absolute visitor figures does not negate the fact that this was a Golden Age for the American amusement park and Coney Island was at the forefront of this fledgling industry. Coney Island’s amusement park focus was in fact three separate parks, Steeplechase, Luna and Dreamland. They were all different to an extent but at their visitor essence was a need, in Walt Whitman’s observation, to “Take a dance”⁵⁰ and by Guy Wetmore Carryl, to visit a place which,

“...Leaps with a shout upon the casual visitor as he steps from a five-cent trolley car into the seething heart of her ten-cent chaos... Immediately recreation becomes less a question of search than of selection.”⁵¹

This level of human contact and shared experience fused the visitors into a singularity and is witnessed in this July 1908 editorial piece by the journalist Elmer Blaney Harris. Writing in *Everybody’s Magazine*, he described a ride on

⁴⁹ David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 95.

⁵⁰ Walt Whitman, 'Coney Island Reader: Through Gates of Illusion', ed. by Louis J Parascandola and John Parascandola (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 52.

⁵¹ Guy Wetmore Carryl, *Coney Island Reader: Through Gates of Illusion*, ed. by Louis J Parascandola and John Parascandola (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 83.

the Great Divide roller coaster, which he undertook with three strangers for whom Harris invented names. David Nasaw paraphrases this experience as,

“For a brief moment, Harris was fused with “Dora,” the man in front and “the old fox” – people he had never met before and would never see again – into a group united for no other purpose than to have a good time together.”⁵²

One of the first places they selected for their shared Coney Island experiences was the creation of George Tilyou with his unique, sensual vision of just what the masses were in search of.

Steeplechase Park

The commercial power of clandestine sexual contact was not lost on George Tilyou in his amusement creations for Steeplechase Park. It was a milieu where the bodies of men and women were literally forced together by centrifugal forces, steep plunges and sharp curves, clinging onto their riding partners on the eponymous Steeplechase ride or catching a glimpse of an ankle on the *Human Roulette Wheel* or the *Wedding Ring*. John F. Kasson observes.

“Various amusements contrived to lift women’s skirts and reveal their legs and underclothing, while numerous others provided the opportunities for intimate physical contact.”⁵³

⁵² David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 94.

⁵³ John F. Kasson, *Amusing The Millions* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 42.

Steeplechase Park opened on the southern tip of Brooklyn in 1897 and in the tradition of showman George Tilyou, a commercial magpie, stole ideas and concepts from earlier expositions and other entertainment enterprises. The concept of an enclosed amusement area and charging an admittance price with the intention of keeping out undesirables and retaining the visitors dollars was, in fact, that of Paul Boynton's who, having exhibited his sea lion show at the Chicago Exposition transferred it to Coney Island in 1895. It was a modest enterprise but included the highly popular *Shoot The Chutes* ride that propelled riders in a flat bottom boat in an artificial lake. It marked Sea Lion Park out as the first Coney amusement park where the rides were the central focus. Tilyou was quick in seizing upon this concept of a paid for, ride-centric, enclosed environment. He based his core concept on the leisure heritage of Coney Island with its three racecourses, Sheepshead Bay, Brighton Beach and Gravesend racetracks. Tilyou built and developed, from an original English invention, a simulacrum horse racing styled, gravity driven ride that stretched for 1,100 foot, encircling the park with six wooden horses riding abreast and giving it its name, Steeplechase Park. It cost \$41,000 to build, just below \$1.25 million at today's prices, and became an instant success. It had all of the required elements. It was very public, circling the exterior of the park where the rider was seen and became vital parts of the spectacle. It was fast yet because it relied on gravity, the larger the rider, the more likely the person had of winning. It required of the rider and passenger to cling together in intimate contact as they enjoyed the ride. It was safe yet exhilarating,

an essential part of the amusement park experience. Roger Cailois inspired John F. Kasson in his appreciation of Steeplechase Park stating that the ride was “essentially a hobby horse for adults” and the parks sideshows,

“Emphasised games of theatricality and of vertigo, which encouraged participants to shed self-consciousness and surrender to a spirit of reckless exuberant play.”⁵⁴

The traditional amusement park sideshows relied on clarity of focus and concentration to win and not gay abandon and this set Tilyou’s park truly apart. This loss of self-awareness was a very different experience to the money making sideshow games of chance in many amusement parks. This is evident in the Olympic Park case history reviewed later in this dissertation.

Tilyou’s approach to business disaster was also distinctive. In July 1907 following a raging fire that started in the *Cave of Winds* attraction nearly 35 acres of Coney Island’s amusement parks were destroyed in just a few hours. For Tilyou the only remnant was the Ferris wheel and a few small sideshows. Unbowed he erected amongst the smouldering wreckage the following sign.

“I had troubles yesterday, that I have not today. I have troubles today that I had not yesterday. On this site will be erected a bigger Steeplechase. Admission to the burning ruins 10 cents.”⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Roger Cailois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. by Meyer Barash (New York: Free Press, 1961).

⁵⁵ Robert Cartmell, *The Incredible Scream Machine: A History of the Roller Coaster* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Press, 1987), p. 167.

Fire was a recurring theme for the early theme parks. The wooden structures were tinder dry during the summer months and many parks including Dreamland, Olympic Park and Cedar Point featured later in this dissertation, had major conflagrations. In many ways they could be viewed as cultural forest fires tearing down the old and providing new exciting blank canvases for the amusement park innovators. Jim Futrell states,

“The fire actually had a positive effect on the rest of the burned out area, as the ramshackle structures that had defined the old Coney Island were now being replaced with more substantial buildings.”⁵⁶

As most amusement parks were uninsurable only ten percent of Coney Island’s estimated \$100 million investment value was insured. It was also a fact that those parks or venues with the most money tended to be those that were resurrected. Tilyou raised a \$1 million dollars, \$27 million at today’s prices, to rebuild the park.

Tilyou decided to forego the dangers of timber and built a huge structure of steel and glass called the *Pavilion of Fun* but filled it with rides central to his theme of close contact between the sexes. Professor Kathy Peiss called it “...a temple to exhibitionism, humor, and heterosexual relations.”⁵⁷ Rides such as *Human Roulette Wheel*, *Barrel of Love* and the *Human Pool Table* were all

⁵⁶ Jim Futrell, *Amusement Parks of New York* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2006), p. 52.

⁵⁷ Kathy Peiss, *Coney Island Reader: Through Gates of Illusion*, ed. by Louis J Parascandola and John Parascandola (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 120.

incorporated into the new structure. In an article written in 1909 in *Hampton's Magazine* Tilyou is quoted as saying.

“We Americans want either to be thrilled or amused, and we are ready to pay well for either sensation...Any success in the amusement business is unaccountable.”⁵⁸

Here he touches on the arcane mysteries of running an amusement park at this time. There was certainly a degree of alchemy in knowing just what the paying public wanted and how to provide it. At this point in time it was impossible to run Steeplechase in the same manner as much later park owners attempted to do, as with Cedar Point's management, who bragged of running it like General Motors. This was a fundamental difference between the Ages of the amusement park. Tilyou's was one based on showmanship and bravura rather than management research and corporate development strategies. Within the Golden Age the next important epoch was that of Thompson and Dundy's new venture.

Luna Park

Following a very successful first season at Tilyou's Steeplechase Park Thompson and Dundy looked for some financial independence of their own. Their target was the ailing Paul Boynton's Sea Lion Park, which they purchased and increased from 15 acres to 22 acres with an investment of \$200,000 of their own money and \$500,000 from outside financial backers, a total investment at today's prices of an

⁵⁸ Reginald Wright Kaufman, 'Why Is Coney?', *Hampton's Magazine*, August 1909, p. 224.

estimated \$19 million. One of these exterior backers was John W. “Bet a Million” Gates, the controller of the United States Realty Company who was named and shamed by his contemporaries as a leading “robber baron” of the “Gilded Age” and was accused by J. Pierpoint Morgan as “the man cannot be trusted with property” and by Andrew Carnegie as “a broken-down gambler.”⁵⁹ In the detailed analysis of Olympic Park and Cedar Point the principal investors came from the new American consumer driven industries of transport, banking and brewing. A move to a lucrative, virtually unregulated, cash-rich nascent industry, such as amusement parks, catering to the mass market appeared to them to be a natural business progression.

There is an anecdotal story that when Thompson and Dundy eventually opened the park they didn’t have enough money left to make change for the ticket office and eventually let people in for free. Their business proposition was to move away from Tilyou’s overtly sexual themes and to try to reclaim some of the grandeur and cultural experience of the exposition’s *Midways* combined with the thrills of the amusement rides. Richard Snow, the American historian, observed that Luna Park was initially advertised as “another world fair”⁶⁰ but Thompson and Dundy soon realised that they had created an “electric Eden” Frederic Thompson proclaimed,

⁵⁹ L. Wendt and H. Kogan, *Bet A Million! The Story of John W Gates* (New York: Arno Press, 1981), pp. 10-11.

⁶⁰ David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 83.

“An exposition is a form of festivity, and serious architecture should not enter into it if it will interfere with the carnival spirit.”⁶¹

Observing this strategy George Tilyou was sanguine about their move away from Steeplechase Park as he saw their target audience as radically different to his own and believed they would just increase the number of the overall visitors to Coney Island. In Reginald Wright Kaufman’s article in *Hampton’s Magazine* he assesses Frederic Thompson’s approach as “He does not study rival parks; he studies people. Setting originality above everything else.” He goes on to describe Thompson joining with the Luna Park crowds and trying to validate his theory “that what grown men most want is to be transformed to children.”⁶²

Following the end of the 1902 Steeplechase season the *A Trip to the Moon* cyclorama was raised up onto rollers and slowly and ceremoniously rolled down Surf Avenue pulled by the amusement park mnemonic animals, the elephants to its new home, the soon to be named Luna Park (not named after this space exploration attraction as many historians believe but after Thompson’s sister). Following its opening night on 16 May 1903 the *New York Times* in its next day edition reported,

“About 45,000 men, women and children strolling along Surf Ave,
from 8 – 1 last night stopped at one point along this varied

⁶¹ David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 83.

⁶² Reginald Wright Kaufman, 'Why Is Coney?', *Hampton's Magazine*, August 1909, p. 224.

thoroughfare and rubbed their eyes and stood in wonder and pinched themselves to see if there was not something wrong somewhere. Yawning on the dingy pleasure thoroughfare was a monster arch, covering half a city block. The interior of this arch was a solid mass of electric lights and rising many feet in the air were four monster monoliths, traced in electric lights and surmounted by great balls of fire, which shed light over the island.”⁶³

Luna Park was a turning point in the development of Coney Island and it generated a wide range of academic commentaries on its scale and content. John F. Kasson called it “ a dream city, a mysterious palace of play.”⁶⁴ David Nasaw describes Luna Park as “totally synthetic where all was artifice, extravagance, and excess.”⁶⁵ Jim Futrell believed Luna Park to be,

“ ...A fantasyland of exotic architecture highlighted by more than a thousand spires, minarets, and towers and outlined by 250.000 electric lights.”⁶⁶

Frederic Thompson is quoted as saying,

⁶³ Albert Bigelow Paine, 'The New Coney Island', *The New York Times*, 17 May 1903, p. 535.

⁶⁴ John F. Kasson, *Amusing The Millions* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 63.

⁶⁵ David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 83.

⁶⁶ Jim Futrell, *Amusement Parks of New York* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2006), p. 49.

“Everything must be different from ordinary experience. What is presented to them must have life action, motion, sensation, surprise, shock, swiftness, or else comedy.”⁶⁷

In Margaret J. King’s view,

“As art and symbol, amusement parks are so incandescent as to be considered an especially American art form, a new American muse.”⁶⁸

However not everyone was convinced by the Luna Park illusions, Maxim Gorky the Russian writer and social commentator in August 1907 describes the owners and operators of the parks as,

“Mean panderers to debased tastes unfold the disgusting nakedness of their falsehood, the naiveté of their shrewdness, the hypocrisy and insatiable force of their greed.”⁶⁹

Another harsh critic was the English writer Sarah Hall who saw Coney Island as

“Absolute consumer-driven modernism, it was vogue anthropomorphism, a swim through the guts and entrails of the world.”⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Dale Samuelson and Wendy Yegoians, 'The American Amusement Park', 2001, p. 28.

⁶⁸ Margaret J. King, 'The New American Muse: Notes on the Amusement /Theme Park', *Journal of Popular Culture*, Summer 1981, pp. 56-62.

⁶⁹ Maxim Gorky, 'Boredom', *Independent*, 6 August 1907, pp. 311-14.

⁷⁰ Sarah Hall, *Coney Island Reader: Through Gates of Illusion*, ed. by Louis J Parascandola and John Parascandola (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 218.

A more positive critical appreciation is left to Reginald Wright Kauffman, who believed the amusement parks of Coney Island were as important to the masses as many of the country's most iconic national park landmarks.

“It is blatant, it is cheap, it is the apotheosis of the ridiculous. But it is something more: it is like Niagara Falls, or the Grand Canyon, or Yellowstone Park: it is a national play-ground: and not to have seen it is not to have seen your own country.”⁷¹

Luna Park's absolute scale and extensive use of technology was the reason that it divided opinion so drastically. This was not an industry or a venue that hid its imagery, in fact, it projected it so brightly that it could be seen twenty miles out into the Atlantic and for many immigrants it was their first ever glimpse of the New World.

The attendance figure for the first day of this new park was assessed at 60,000, which is most probably a wild exaggeration even with the female ticket vendors selling ten-cent tickets standing on chariots at the entrance to the park allowing many people into the park free due to the lack of change. Other than the signature attraction of the *A Trip to the Moon*, now housed in a new \$52,000 building and which accrued over \$250,000 in ticket sales Luna Park took amusement standards to new heights. On billboards posted across the city and particularly throughout Surf Avenue, the park advertised itself as having, “Thirty-

⁷¹ Reginald Wright Kaufman, 'Why Is Coney?', *Hampton's Magazine*, August 1909, p. 115.

Nine Supreme, Stupendous, Spectacular, Sensational Shows.” The posters also claim of the new park, “By day a Paradise – at night Arcadia.”⁷² The introduction of over 250,000 electric lights totally transformed the evening experience for the visitor. There were numerous further attractions such as the *War of the Worlds* building replicating in précis form famous battles from around the globe. There was also the *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* a polar submarine ride employing some of Paul Boynton’s old sea lions and polar bears housed on make-believe ice floes, all kept cold through a massive refrigeration plant. There were the famous “educational” ethnic villages of Hindu, Eskimo, Irish and German heritage in reality little more than elaborate freak shows. The central educational exhibit was Dr Courtney’s *Baby Incubator* where he pioneered modern day paediatrics in a carnival environment. According to Judith A. Adams he adroitly combined “showmanship with scientific integrity.”⁷³ Of the 8,000 babies that entered the Premature Incubators over 6,500 survived to attend very special reunions, as adults, annually at Coney Island. This was an exhibit that appealed strongly to women. Judith A. Adams continues,

“ Women made up most of the clientele, especially those who were childless. Some returned daily or weekly to follow the progress of particular infants. Other visitors, generally with little education, were

⁷² Carl Hagenbeck, *Empire of Entertainments* ([n.p]: University of Washington Press, 2008), p. 179.

⁷³ Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p. 51.

probably somewhat transfixed by the technology. By seeing how the gadgetry worked, they could participate in a medical milieu that was otherwise firmly closed and mysterious to them.”⁷⁴

There is little doubt that the contemporary American amusement park did democratise its audience away from male-biased sports and beer drinking entertainments, yet as outlined in the Olympic Park, it is evident that much of the early appeal to women was of a token nature and it took the female social and employment revolutions of two World Wars to fully integrate women into the paying amusement park audience. It took too many amusement park owners too long to understand and appreciate the importance of women to the question of which amusement park the family would ultimately visit.

The rides however remained the true attention-setting technological innovators for Luna Park with rides such as *Mountain Torrent*, a hybrid roller coaster and *Shoot the Chute* style of action ride, propelling riders down an eighty foot hill to eventually splash down into an Arctic lake. One of Luna’s roller coaster ventures was, however, not such a success. The *Leap the Gap* roller coaster style ride was developed to do just that, a death-defying leap across an actual gap in the roller coaster track. The passenger laden car was seemingly fired from a cannon and would leap over a terrifying gap in the roller coaster’s track. It was never put into full operation as during testing the inconsistencies of

⁷⁴ Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p. 52.

the potential weight of the riders made it impossible to judge correctly the trajectory of each car. In true Coney Island style the gap in the track was filled in and the roller coaster rebranded and repurposed as the *Cannon Coaster*. This trial and error approach continued throughout the park's lifetime. In 1921 *The Scenic Spiral Wheel* or *The Top* as it was colloquially known was dismantled after visitors found the 70-foot high two and a half minute ride across 3,200 foot certainly not to their liking.

In David Nasaw's view,

“Luna was an instant and overwhelming success. The speed with which Thompson and Dundy not only repaid their investors but accumulated profits in the hundreds of thousands of dollars was sufficient for others to enter the amusement park business.”⁷⁵

One of the first of these emulators to enter the Coney Island amusement fray was the consortium led by a real estate speculator. It was the last to enter and the first to spectacularly fail.

Dreamland

This amusement park was the last of the original Coney Island amusement park triumvirate. Yet it was very different to the approach of both Steeplechase and Luna. This was not a park constructed through the creative energy of a visionary leader who held a belief that they knew just what the masses wanted as

⁷⁵ David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 83-84.

entertainment. This park was singularly a commercial venture to emulate and to capitalize on the existing park's success and was simply an attempt to make a quick and easy return on investment. Judith A. Adams harshly observes that Dreamland's main claim to fame was that the park "...is noteworthy for its failure."⁷⁶ The chief of this investor syndicate was William H. Reynolds who was a politician and a real estate speculator and who was certainly no amusement park visionary. In 1904 he and his investors committed 3.5 million dollars, over 94 million dollars at today's prices, into building this new amusement park. Acknowledging their lack of experience in this fledgling industry they appointed Samuel Gumpertz as the park's creative impresario and an architectural company Kirby Pettit and Green to design the 15-acre park.

The park was a hybrid of ideas and themes, as if designed by a committee rather than by the creative individualism of Tilyou or Thompson. It reverted to the generous use of "staff" to create the architectural infrastructure of the park. The park's overblown architectural style was termed by John F. Kasson as "Imperial Orgiastic."⁷⁷ It increased the wattage from Luna's 250,000 incandescent lights to over 1,000,000. Its central Beacon Tower was taller than Luna's central tower and alone was illuminated by 100,000 bulbs truly shining like "a cattie on a hill." The tower was based on the Giralda, the bell tower of the

⁷⁶ Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p. 52.

⁷⁷ John F. Kasson, *Amusing The Millions* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 63.

cathedral in Seville Spain. This non-secular theme was continued with architectural designs like The Creation, a semi-nude classical statue at the gates of the park and a religious recreation show of the first chapters of Genesis. These worthy exhibits were offset by more popularist entertainments such as a giant 25,000 square-foot seashell-covered ballroom, and a double slide *Shoot the Chutes* ride that could carry 7,000 riders an hour and is still reputed to be the largest water slide ever built. Other attractions included a Swiss-themed roller coaster through the Alps, a canal trip through Venice Italy, and a Lilliputian ethnographic village peopled by over 300 midgets, again more freak show than educational. The educational element of the park was emphasised by the young female ticket vendors wearing college gowns and mortarboards to attract the visitors to this quasi-educational and Christian venue. To many visitors looking for a release from the ordinary this park lacked, the visceral excitement necessary to draw the really big crowds. It fell between the aims of educating and amusing the masses. According to Karen Jones and John Wills, ‘...visitors remained more enchanted with the garish enticements of Thompson’s Luna.’⁷⁸ Jim Futrell criticised that Dreamland “took itself too seriously.” Gary Kyriazi states, “While it was indeed bigger, cleaner, more beautiful and had more rides and attractions than Luna or Steeplechase, it simply lacked the showmanship to pull in the crowds.” Allowing for Kyriazi’s error that it was “bigger”, Luna was actually 22

⁷⁸ Karen Jones and John Wills, *The Invention Of The Park: Recreational Landscapes From The garden Of Eden To Disney's Magic Kingdom* (Cambridge: Polity Press), p. 52.

acres compared to Dreamland's 15 acres, historians have identified this absence of the mercurial asset of "showmanship" as a key factor in its lack of success."

But failure was not isolated to Dreamland alone and by the end of the Golden Age only Steeplechase Park was extant in this globally recognised American amusement area.

Coney Island: The End of the Beginning

Although the Golden Age of American amusement parks was to nominally last until the stock market crash in the autumn of 1929, the end of the iconic Coney epoch was much earlier. Gary Kyriazi termed the first two decades of the twentieth century as the "Spectacular Era."⁷⁹ It was replaced by what some historians have called the "Nickel Age." What marked Coney Island's amusement parks premature decline was death, debt, fire, competition and an increasing demand for cheaper and cheaper mass entertainment.

The first park to cease to exist was unsurprisingly the last main entrant, Dreamland, which was destroyed by a huge conflagration on the night of 27 May 1911. Ironically the fire started on the *Hell's Gate* attraction, a ride that drew visitors on boats into the fiery underworld. A pot of tar left unattended during pre-season maintenance ignited and brought to an end the entire park, which had never quite lived up to its financial expectations by its investors. The estimated cost of the destruction of the park was \$2.2 million dollars, over \$56 million at

⁷⁹ Gary Kyriazi, *The Great American Amusement Parks A Pictorial History* (New Jersey: Castle Books, 1976), p. 79.

today's prices, with little more than ten percent of it insured. The destruction covered not just its own 15 acres but also almost the same acreage again surrounding the park. Dreamland was also renowned for its circus acts, Captain Bonavita's lions, Madame Aurora and her polar bears and Herman Weedom's hyenas and big cats. Many of these animals perished locked in cages. Stories of lions running along Surf Avenue manes aflame were however pure Coney Island mythology. True to form many New Yorkers arrived the following day in a huge public display of schadenfreude to witness the smouldering amusement park wreckage. Almost as they arrived, George Gumpertz, the park's creative head, was laying plans for a modest *Dreamland Circus Sideshow* replacement attraction that housed a huge mixture of freaks, which in many ways set the cheaper tone for the coming Nickel Age on Coney Island. Dreamland as a major stand-alone amusement park was never to be rebuilt.

The next Coney Island amusement park to succumb was Luna Park. In 1905 Thompson and Dundy reversed their tried and tested business strategy of attracting the crowds to their entertainment venues and instead went physically in search of a new audience. They did this by building the New York Hippodrome in the centre of Manhattan. It was a vast enterprise with a technologically driven stage twelve times the size of an average Broadway theatre. It could hold a fourteen-foot deep glass tank that could house re-creations of historic sea battles or elaborate water based ballets. The Hippodrome could accommodate 5,000 paying customers and had a cast including animals of over a 1,000 for the four-

hour show. According to David Nasaw it was a mixture of vaudeville, circus and opera. The media vaunted the theatre's unique flamboyant production values, the *New York Times* heralded it, as "Not in London or Paris is there anything to equal the Hippodrome."⁸⁰ After just a single year Thompson and Dundy however lost control of this new entertainment venture to ironically one of the first financial backers of Luna Park, the so-called "robber baron" John W. Gates.

Just two years later the financial rock of the partnership, Elmer Dundy, died suddenly leaving the creative maestro alone. There are a number of unsupported and undocumented stories by historians and popular culture observers that Thompson became fixated on promoting his new young wife's acting career and in the process became an alcoholic. There is little empirical proof of any of these narratives and is most probably an easy and convenient way of resolving the end of this visionary man. He sold Luna Park to an advertising pioneer, Barron Collier, in 1912 for an undisclosed sum but the park had by then certainly accrued debts to and had lost its precious fire insurance. Frederic Thompson was to die following the end of World War I in 1919.

One of the first shows commissioned by Barron Collier during these uncertain times was *Aerial Night Attacks*, a live action re-creation of a German Zeppelin attack on a French village. The American audience experienced the European wartime travails vicariously through this type of exhibit and show.

⁸⁰ New York American, 'The Hippodrome', *New York Times*, 1905, 5.

Collier then hired Arthur Jarvis a stalwart of Coney Island's amusement parks and a huge supporter of the roller coaster. He brought the *Drop the Dips* coaster from the Bowery and introduced the *Mile Sky Chaser* which in its first season was purported to have carried over one million visitors. But for this park, like so many others across the country, the Great Depression proved to be their breaking point and in 1933 it was declared bankrupt. He continued to attempt to revive its fortunes the following year with no success and eventually sold it in 1935. New owners failed to resurrect this defunct park and after two unsuccessful re-launches in 1935 and 1941 it finally went the way of many iconic amusement parks in 1946 with an all-engulfing fire.

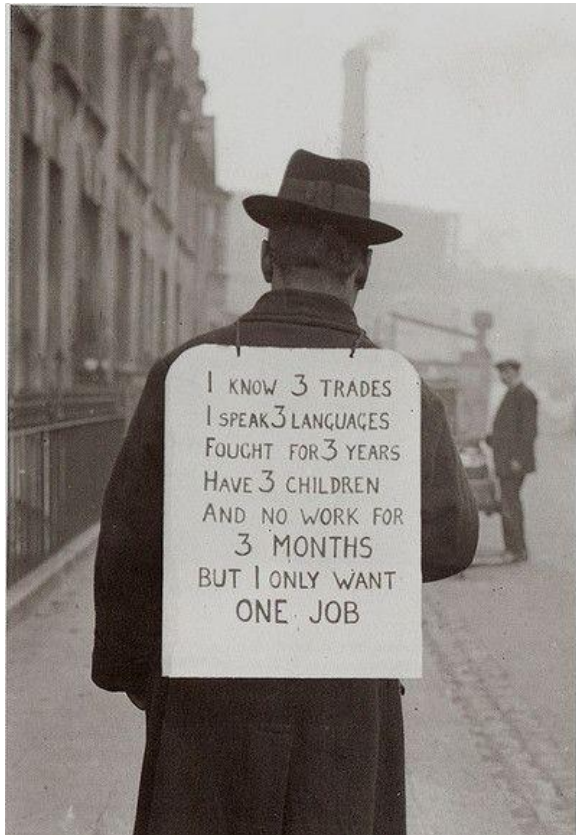
The final Coney Island amusement park to close, in its original form, was Steeplechase Park. Judith A. Adams observes,

“Steeplechase Park, surviving not only fire but also the Great Depression, two world wars, and radical cultural change, remained in operation into the 1960s.”⁸¹

George Tilyou had died in 1914 and whilst the park had stayed in his family's hands with his son Edward initially taking over and successfully running the park for a further fifty years it is accepted that without the acknowledged creative panache of his father the park was never quite the same again.

⁸¹ Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p. 46.

Section 4:3 The Age of Decline



“Most of the scream machines slowly became silent, rotten wooden dinosaurs.”⁸²

Judith A. Adams

The phase of the Age of Decline for American amusement parks is accepted by historians and commentators as starting with the collapse of the American stock market in the autumn of 1929, however it is likely that the seeds of the industry’s decline were sown much earlier. Yet, as previously stated, setting finite start and end dates for amusement epochs is an uncertain art and certainly not a science. As this dissertation has asserted earlier the Coney Island triumvirate of amusement parks began to decline technically and culturally long before 1929. This is not to

⁸² Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p.17.

posit that these parks did not continue to attract vast crowds during the 1920s but they were living off past visionary glories and newly found cheapness.

In a very short period the major innovators of the Coney Island parks had all died. Elmer Dundy died of a heart attack and severe pneumonia in February 1907, George Tilyou died in 1914, at the age of just 52 and Frederic Thompson died in 1919, purportedly an alcoholic. In just 12 years the generation of master showmen, who weaved technical innovation into mainstream amusement rides and spectacular shows, were gone leaving the industry and its iconic Coney Island location to decline into what has been called the Nickel Empire of Coney Island's amusement parks. There had always been a stratification of Coney Island's visitors, from the upmarket clam bakers of Walt Whitman's day, to the middle class families enjoying a day at Luna Park and Dreamland through to the young men and women looking for romance and cheap thrills on Steeplechase's tactile rides. The 1920's brought a more working class immigrant visitor to the parks who having travelled for just a nickel on the trolley car, were looking to replicate that value with rides and the now famous hotdogs for the same cheap outlay.

Coney Island was, of course, happy to acquiesce to these new demands. It cheapened its amusement offerings with dramatic effect. Dale Samuelson observed,

“Every showman, carnival man and con-man in the country headed for Coney Island. The concentration of rides, games, grab-joints, souvenir

stands, shooting galleries, arcades and side-shows that proliferated on this thin strip of sand was staggering.”⁸³

The Coney Island amusement parks were no longer the special enclaves of fantasy and fun. They had become brutally commercialised beyond all recognition and ambition of their pioneers. This was manifest in new entertainments of the masses on a gargantuan scale and at a meagre cost. In many ways the so-called Nickel Empire was an intermediate buffer period between the “Spectacular Age” of the first two decades of the 20th century and the devastating “Age of Decline” during the 1930s economic depression in the country.

One of the enduring images of this cheapened entertainment era was manifest on the trolley and tramcar rides home at the close of a day at the beach and the amusement parks. In order to save on the cost of a bathhouse, where bathers could dry themselves on hired towels and dress in street clothes, they went home wrapped in a cloth still wet from the sea and became known colloquially by New Yorkers as “drippers.”⁸⁴

This dissertation has used Coney Island’s three main parks as iconic exemplars for America’s amusement park industry during these three ages of the industry. However by the time of the economic crash of the 1930s the amusement park industry had become a national phenomenon with Steeplechase Park, Luna

⁸³ Dale Samuelson and Wendy Yegoians, 'The American Amusement Park', 2001, p. 34.

⁸⁴ David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 242.

Park and Dreamland emulators in every city across the country, often even copying their names. Atlantic City in New Jersey had seven entertainment piers by 1913. South Carolina had Myrtle Beach and Maryland had Ocean City. As the population moved ever westwards so amusement parks flourished in San Diego, Santa Monica, Venice Beach and San Francisco. The Midwest states were also not immune to the amusement park phenomenon with parks in such diverse places as Denver, Chicago, Ohio, Phoenix and Pittsburgh. Yet all were subject to the downward market vicissitudes with John Hannigan stating, “almost all the amusement parks closer to the city centres went out of business.”⁸⁵

As discussed earlier it is difficult to quote absolute figures on the numbers of parks extant in the United States of America at any one point. This was due to the fact that the government did not collect industry data until the 1950s and many parks were privately owned and never published public accounts. Judith A. Adams made a valiant attempt at quantifying the number of parks in the following chart.⁸⁶ The sheer number of reference points needed to create this one estimate for the size and value of the industry over time underlines quite how difficult it is to find reliable industry data.

⁸⁵ John Hannigan, *Fantasy City: Pleasure and Profit in the Postmodern Metropolis* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 1998), p. 39.

⁸⁶ Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p. 67.

Number of Amusement Parks, Receipts (in millions of dollars), and U.S Population (in millions), 1920 – 1963

Year	Number of Parks	Receipts	U.S Population
1920	1800-2000	N/A	106.0
1935	303	9.0	127.3
1939	245	10.1	130.9
1948	368	38.7	146.6
1954	400 (estimated)	N/A	162.4
1958	600 (estimated)	N/A	174.1
1963	997	105.9	189.2
1967	786	174.1	198.7

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Business, 1935, 1939, 1948, 1954, 1958, 1963, 1967 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1937, 1942, 1952, 1956, 1961, 1966, 1970); “Amusement Parks Unveil Their Winter’s Work,” Business Week 15 May 1954,185;U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington, D.C. Government Printing Office, 1975), ser A29 – 42.

According to Gary Kyriazi the maximum number of parks was 1,500 and he claimed their ubiquity was such that,

“ It was almost possible to ride from the East Coast to the West Coast on roller coasters.”⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Gary Kyriazi, *The Great American Amusement Parks A Pictorial History* (New Jersey: Castle Books, 1976), p. 98.

Many observers of popular culture and historians have investigated different areas to explain the decline in Coney Island's fortunes. An anonymously written article in *Fortune Magazine* observes that the iconic Coney Island Feltman's restaurant reduced its staffing levels from "1,200 to 350."⁸⁸ The class tensions between the city's governing elite and the owners of the amusement parks continued to be evident with the 1934 retrograde election of Robert Moses to the position of Parks Commissioner. He declared that the carnival atmosphere that was Coney Island's imprimatur "should be replaced by a Coney Island where mechanical rides would give way to scientific recreational facilities."⁸⁹ The governing elite had had enough of the masses enjoying themselves and wanted to bring about a more sober, less boisterous and less democratic societal amusement experience. This transformation is brought into sharp relief when Moses' uses with the word "recreational" rather than "amusement."

Judith A. Adams views the Great Depression as just part of the reason for the decline of the amusement park industry. She includes contributing factors such as, "the automobile craze,"⁹⁰ with its ability to take the visitor further afield and for longer periods. The lack of parking facilities for open top cars at the amusement parks was also becoming important to potential visitors. Other

⁸⁸ Fortune Magazine, *Coney Island Reader: Through Gates of Illusion*, ed. by Louis J Parascandola and John Parascandola (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 231.

⁸⁹ Jim Futrell, *Amusement Parks of New York* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2006), p. 56.

⁹⁰ Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p. 66.

negative factors she highlights are public transport strikes, Prohibition, poor summer weather and the selling of the parks by the transit companies to private individuals. She later states that the traditional white visitor to the parks faced with greater racial integration particularly with African-Americans in the 1950's and 1960's, just stopped attending and chose the predominantly white Disney Theme Park alternative. Many, if not all, of these factors are investigated more fully in the case history sections of this dissertation on Olympic Park Cedar Point and Knotts Berry Farm.

Section 5: Olympic Park Irvington New Jersey



“The early parks were decorous, inexpensive and family centered, with leafy groves, unpretentious gardens and many places to sit down.”

Newark News 7 September 1965

An important aspect of the American amusement park industry is that the amusement parks themselves had very separate and unique identities. Yet, whilst they had very distinct personalities, each amusement park’s central attractions were often interchangeable and indistinguishable from each other. The parks were able to replicate each other’s attractions with relative commercial ease. If one park had a roller coaster, which proved financially rewarding to its proprietors, it did not take long for its competitors to emulate this success with their own version of a roller coaster.

The initial winners were therefore the ride manufacturers and not the park operators. In 1889 the *New York Times Illustrated Magazine* featured an article on Charles W. E. Dare's New York Carousel Manufacturing Company.

“A carousel costs from \$300 to \$10,000 according to the decorations and finish. A wooden figure of a prancing horse, with its right foreleg gracefully raised, and its trimming, mane and saddle carved of wood, costs from \$14 to \$35 according to size...A carousel that will seat 60 riders measures 40 feet in diameter and costs \$2,200...In one large factory in Brooklyn twenty five carvers are kept at work all year round...Carousel organs cost from \$30 to \$2,000 each according to size, the number of keys, and decorations, and play eight, nine and ten tunes.”⁹¹

According to Judith A. Adams, the Armitage-Hershall Company of North Tonawanda had sold sixty carousels by 1890, and by 1891 were shipping on average one carousel per day.⁹² Many of the ride constructors also went on to manage the rides as concessionaires, sharing profits with the park.

The parks, once they had an amusement area with roller coasters, carousels, Ferris wheel, whips, helter-skelters and bumper cars, were very similar visitor experiences. This interchangeability created an erroneous, academic thesis that

⁹¹ New York Times Illustrated Magazine, 'How a Carousel Is Made', *New York Times Illustrated Magazine*, 19 March 1899, p. 13.

⁹² Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p. 11.

the parks were therefore part of a homogenous industry rather than in reality, highly individualistic enterprises. An individual park's success or failure was a result of many sundry factors such as their business strategies, how they were marketed and advertised, their specific locations, their competitive stance, the type of visitors they attracted, their investment programmes and their ability to adapt to meet the consumer needs. It is academically misleading, if convenient, to commodify the parks into an amorphous whole. This section of the dissertation analyses three separate parks in detail, Olympic Park in Irvington New Jersey, Cedar Point in Sandusky Ohio and Knotts Berry Farm in southern California to demonstrate both the similarities between the parks as well as their important defining differences. First it addresses Olympic Park in Irvington New Jersey, to attempt to prove the point that individuality was as important to the visitor as the number of attractions in the amusement park. Paradoxically this individuality was also one of the main causes of Olympic Park's ultimate demise.

This section will cover Olympic Park's history from its launch as a picnic area in a rural setting on the outskirts of Irvington, through to the park's closing in an increasingly multi-racial, low income, residential suburb of New York in the mid-1960's. In approaching such a forensic examination, this dissertation suggests that with the absence of published academic research it is important to review, analyse and use what the local media and inhabitants were saying about the park throughout its history as much as what subsequent academic cultural observers and historians of the park have espoused. Using this ground-up

approach allows the park and its visitors to speak for themselves. It will become evident that Olympic Park was a world away from the raucous experience of Coney Island, albeit that the two were so closely situated on the East Coast of the country and part of the same outdoor entertainment industry sector. Both parks provided the space for carnival but in very different manners. Olympic Park will also blur and contradict the accepted academic boundaries between an amusement park and the theme park as promoted by so many historians, including Russell Nye and Judith A. Adams. The amusement park industry's beginnings grew from the amusement Midways of the city-based Expositions of the late nineteenth century yet their antecedents went back even further in time.

In 1852 local resident, Stephen Foster penned the bawdy minstrel song "De Camptown Races" which so enraged the inhabitants of the community that they chose to rename their town, Irvingtown, after the renowned American writer, Washington Irving. In 1874 the name of the town was shortened to Irvington and it had its own mayor, village council, fire and police departments. By 1890 the first electric trolleybus joined Irvington to Newark creating a prosperous white suburban town. This growing appeal to the prosperous white suburbanite is evident in the census data for this time. In 1905 it is estimated that the population had surged to 7,180. Five years later it had grown to 11,877 and to 25,480 and 56,733 by the end of each subsequent census counts. As a community it had transformed itself from a thriving rural economy to a major suburb catering for

the needs of this mainly German, English and Irish and almost exclusively white communities.

This growing societal sophistication galvanised the infrastructure innovations that were introduced to the town over this time. In 1874 wooden sidewalks and gas lights were introduced to the centre of the town, the first telephone call was answered in 1888, a sub-surface water supply system was built in 1894 and the first car owned by an Irvington resident arrived in 1900, five years before the town saw its first paved road.

Against all of the improvements within the town there was a commensurate need to provide for the recreational needs of the burgeoning population. People gradually began to have more free time and money to spend on entertaining themselves away from the drudgery of manual work and debilitating office regimes. It was with this societal groundswell that a traditional German picnic garden was transformed into one of America's most resilient amusement parks, Olympic Park.

Olympic Park opened on 28 May 1904 in a location known by local inhabitants as a tranquil place for picnics, beer drinking, male orientated sports, games and music, mainly catering for the German immigrants. Known previously as Hilton Park and Becker's Woods this was a well-known recreational spot for Irvington's residents following Sunday church services and, as such, Sunday best clothes became mandatory to a visit to the amusement park. One local newspaper *Freie Zeitung* heralded the launch as,

“...A new place of enjoyment...a first-class amusement park...On the newly built arena astonishing circus acts will perform, including Japanese trapeze artists, European balancers, three trained dogs, talking geese, and so forth. There are hundreds of additional amusements in the park. The Helter-Skelter, an exact copy of the one at Luna Park, Coney Island, will provide very special entertainment. No extra admission will be charged for all these amusements. Both young and old may ride two camels in the park. A miniature railroad, consisting of a locomotive and 10 cars, will transport patrons around the park. The entire establishment is like a fairy land lighted with thousands of electric lights...A colossal dance hall is being constructed 150 feet long and 80 feet wide That the kitchen and cellar will offer the best food and drink is guaranteed by the renown of the Colosseum.”⁹³

A rival newspaper the *Newark Sunday News* also eulogised,

“When the gates of the new Olympic Park are thrown open to the public next Saturday local pleasure seekers will have reasons to congratulate themselves upon this addition to the number of nearby outing resorts. As a place for recreation and amusement it promises to rank among the most attractive of its kind in this section. Finely

⁹³ Freie Zeitung, 28 May 1904.

wooded and naturally attractive, the place is being transformed by a lavish expenditure of money on the part of the new management and by the ingenuity of skilled artisans and landscape artists into an enticing spot...Electricity will play an important part in the decorative scheme of the grounds, as over 2,000 vari-coloured incandescent lamps will be used to lighten up the dense foliage of the trees at night and give a spectacular appearance to the scene...A Midway, supplied with a shooting gallery, merry-go-round, swings, gypsy fortune-tellers and go-carts and ponies, will be an attractive feature of the place. A women's parlour, in the form of a castle, has been erected and a larger and more modern band pavilion replaces the old one.”⁹⁴

In these two short editorial pieces are evident a constellation of the dynamics that would ultimately determine the success or failure of an entertainment enterprise such as Olympic Park. Every park needed constant reinvention and subsequent high levels of reinvestment. They were in a highly competitive marketplace for visitors' leisure time and needed more than just business acumen to succeed. The management of the parks required a highly developed understanding and vision of just what the consumer wanted, a grasp of the zeitgeist of the times and an understanding of the needs of the whole family.

⁹⁴ Newark Sunday News, *Newark Sunday News*, 21 May 1904.

The launch of Olympic Park was at the start of what is academically sometimes known as the Golden Age of Amusement Parks.

Coney Island's three individual parks had established the amusement park entertainment benchmarks and had both national and international renown for leading the way in mass communication and amusement. Yet here, less than 28 miles from Coney Island, was a successful park that simply featured a Helter-Skelter, a miniature railroad, a couple of camels and some talking geese. Yet it prospered against the technologically advanced mechanical rides of Coney's Steeplechase Park, Luna Park and Dreamland. The traditional miniature railway was a stalwart of early American amusement parks and this idea was not lost on Walter Elias Disney in the development of Disneyland some fifty years later.

In the *Newark Sunday News* there is also a reference to the number of nearby "outing resorts". Olympic Park's main competition was with Electric Park on South Orange Avenue, an under invested, creatively limited amusement park which lasted until 1912 in its final guise as the Newark Motordrome but closed after an accident that claimed the lives of eight spectators. The other local competitor, the Hillside Pleasure Park, another park that failed to differentiate itself and which later became the Riviera Park, went into liquidation in 1927 after what was described as "...too many rainy Sundays..."⁹⁵ This demise was almost at the peak of the Golden Age of amusement parks and displays an enterprise

⁹⁵ Alan A. Siegel, *Smile A Picture History of Olympic Park 1887-1965* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), p. 12.

clearly not meeting the needs of its potential visitors. They were not alone in failing in this highly competitive marketplace.

The table below displays, just for the State of New Jersey, the longevity or otherwise of the other competing parks in the State. It was a saturated and highly competitive marketplace with some forty parks operating in the state of New Jersey alone. Only those parks that could offer something unique would survive the vicissitudes of the outdoor entertainment business.

Lifespan of New Jersey Amusement Parks

Alcyon Park	1892 – 1945
Bayonne Pleasure Park	1909 – 1935s
Bellwood Park, Pattenberg	1902 – 1906
Belvidere Beach, Keensberg	1912 – 1933
Bergen Point Park/Uncle Miltys	1900s – 1970s
Bertrand Island, Lake Hopatcong	1925 – 1983
Bullington Island Park	1910s – 1934
Casino Amusements	1932 – 1990
Casino Arcade, Wildwood	1916 – 1980
Central Pier, Atlantic City	1921 – 1993
Colombia Park, Union Hill	1919 – 1930s
Days of Fun, Florence	1950s – 1970
Dreamland Park, Elizabeth	1922 – 1939
Gillian’s Fun Deck, Ocean City	1930 - 1987
Herman’s Amusements/Schiffels, Point Pleasure Beach	1949 – 1987

Hunt's Pier, Wildwood	1957 – 1991
Kiddie Carnival, Pine Brook	1950s – 1987
Kiddieland, Pennsauken	1955 – 1960s
Kiddieland, Saddle River Township	1950s – 1960s
Lincoln Park, Paulsboro	1890 – 1906
Long Branch Pier, Long Branch	1902 – 1987
Marine Pier, Wildwood	1931 – 1976
Million Dollar Pier, Atlantic City	1906 – 1981
Nolan's Point, Lake Hopatcong	1920s – 1933
Ocean Pier, Wildwood	1905 – 1943
Palace Amusements, Asbury Park	1887 – 1988
Palisades Park, Cliffside Park	1898 – 1971
Playland/Marine/Nickels, Wildwood	1919 – 1998
Rendezvous Park, Atlantic City	1921 – 1924
Riverview Beach, Pennsville	1891 – 1968
Scheutzen Park, Atlantic City	1875 – 1964
Sportland Pier, Wildwood	1928 – 1982
Staintons Playland, Ocean City	1929 – 1955
Steeplechase Pier, Atlantic City	1899 – 1986
Storyland Village, Neptune City	1956 – 1962
Tumbling Dam Park, Bridgeboro	1893 – 1946
Washington Park, Woodberry	1895 – 1913
White City, Trenton	1908 – 1910s
Woodlyne Park, Camden	1901 – 1912
Wuest Casino, Point Pleasure Beach	1930s – 1975

Source: Jim Futtrell, *Amusement Parks of New Jersey* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2004). pp. 41-42.

The second editorial piece also referred to a “ladies Parlour” which confirms the growing importance of women as visitors to these venues. Olympic Park’s management wished to broaden their appeal from the male dominated, German lager drinking, carousing and sports playing and to attract a more family focussed visitor, more in keeping with the identity of the new suburbanites flooding into the community. However, gaining full gender equality was still a hope rather than a reality, and racial discrimination against African-Americans was rife throughout the history of Olympic Park. In Olympic’s own promotional material it made a point of noting that the waiters in its huge restaurant were German born only. There was not even room for African-Americans as waiters in this exclusive park that saw itself as the “Eldorado of Essex County.”⁹⁶

A further editorial piece in the *Daily Advertiser* published one week after the opening of the park stated,

“Within easy reach at the cost of a five-cent trolley fare of the various residence sections as well as of the business centres of Newark, not the smallest of attractions offered by a visit to the new park is the delightful ride through pleasant scenery.”⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Alan A. Siegel, *Smile A Picture History of Olympic Park 1887-1965* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), p. 16.

⁹⁷ *Daily Advertiser*, *Daily Advertiser*, 3 June 1904.

In 1905, just one year after its opening, its owners, Christian Kurz and Herman Schmidt, beginning to understand this need for continuous reinvestment in innovation and improvement, introduced an electric carousel, a roller coaster, a ballroom and a theatre to the park. At the same time the nightly firework display was introduced which became a firm favourite with visitors. The magical importance of this feature attraction was not lost on Walt Disney when he launched Disneyland over fifty years later with his own nightly firework extravaganzas. Both Schmidt and Disney understood that fireworks froze the fantasy inspired, illuminated landscapes of the amusement park's almost indelibly into the minds and imaginations of the visitors.

From an article written in the entertainment trade magazine *Billboard* in 1909 this access to the park was further described as,

“...One of the finest, shadiest and most accommodating parks in the East, easy to reach by trolley...is growing so rapidly that (Herman Schmidt) is always ready to add further developments, and he expects to have a little city of his own in a few years, by which time he hopes to reach the top notch and will continue to improve the enterprise until the business shows an income of half a million dollars a season.”⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Alan A. Siegel, *Smile A Picture History of Olympic Park 1887-1965* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), p. 25.

In this quote from the industry's leading trade magazine the first reference to Olympic's revenues with a quoted figure of "half a million dollars" of revenue in a season is provided. This was an incredible return on investment, the equivalent of an estimated 13.2 million dollars in 2016, but the truth was that much of this money was reinvested in the park to attract repeat visitors.

The trolley companies were focussed on promoting the journey to the park as much as an adventure as those found once arriving at the park. The very early urban amusement parks were called "trolley parks" providing the operating companies with a revenue generating reason for promoting weekend travel for the masses.

The ease of access issue was totally understood by the park's management. A piece of the Olympic Park's own promotional literature, also from 1909, describes that access was key to its success in creating an audience of 10,000 visitors each and every day of the season.

"It is the easiest thing in the world to reach Olympic Park by trolley.

A double-track loop, especially constructed for the convenience of the patrons of the resort, brings the visitor right to the main entrance.

Cars run direct from all points on Newark's two principal thoroughfares – Market Street and Broad Streets...What good is a

place if you can't get to it? But everyone can get to Olympic Park.”

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In a separate section of the brochure the needs of the ever-increasing numbers of automobile drivers are clearly met.

“Autoists find Olympic Park ideal for an afternoon, evening and Sunday outing. Sheds and other conveniences are provided. Essex County has the finest roads in the world and all roads lead to Olympic Park.”¹⁰⁰

Leaving aside the obvious advertising hyperbole, what the owners of Olympic Park realised very early on was the need for a fully integrated transport system to service the park. Only in this way was the target of ten thousand visitors a day during the season a viable business objective. The profits were ploughed back into the business to ensure that each and every season the park bought new levels of entertainment and innovation. A further section of the brochure, dwarfed by the coverage of male dominated sports events and headline news of the enormous new dance hall, contains this small piece,

“ For the women and the children there are a thousand and one attractions. When they are tired of fun and sightseeing there is the popular Carousel to give them zest with rest; the ice cream booth,

⁹⁹ Alan A. Siegel, *Smile A Picture History of Olympic Park 1887-1965* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), p. 31.

¹⁰⁰ Alan A. Siegel, *Smile A Picture History of Olympic Park 1887-1965* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), p. 32.

where they sip cold but delicious comfort; recreation spots galore and the big restaurants with all kinds of nice things to eat and drink.”¹⁰¹

However much the academic axiom that amusement parks democratised their customers is posited, it is evident that this park was still inherently a male bastion at the end of this first decade of the twentieth century.

As with many of these early, wood built, amusement parks the threat of fire was a major factor in determining their survival. All of Coney Island’s three main amusement parks suffered catastrophic fire damage and on 14 June 1914 a similar conflagration destroyed Olympic Park’s famous opera house, dance pavilion and grandstand and might easily have destroyed the whole park. As a result of the strain of personally directing the rescue operations, Olympic Park’s main architect and owner Herman Schmidt, suffered a major stroke, resulting ultimately in the park becoming a victim of a sheriff’s sale to another German business, the Home Brewing Company. The Guenther family owned this venture and it was Henry Guenther who took personal control of Olympic Park in 1919 and re-launched the park in 1921 as a very different entity. It was now re-launched as a park with modern technological inspired mechanised rides, yet it still attempted to retain and maintain the core values of good behaviour and “classiness” of the original park. There is little doubt that the contribution and dedication of the Guenther family was a major factor in the longevity of the park.

¹⁰¹ Alan A. Siegel, *Smile A Picture History of Olympic Park 1887-1965* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), p. 32.

The irony of the ownership structure of the park is that whilst it was owned by a family run brewing company it never sold alcohol following its purchase, striving to preserve its more genteel and possibly white elitist approach to outdoor entertainment.

One of the missing factors in the location of Olympic Park was that, unlike many of its key competitors, it lacked a site close to any expanse of water be it, sea, lake or river. This waterside identity was certainly a hallmark of the more successful amusement parks across the country. From a *Fortune Magazine* article first written in 1938 this waterside importance was highlighted for Coney Island.

“It is a fairly good beach, but only includes fifty-seven acres of sand at high tide. Armed with lunch boxes, water-wings, baseballs, harmonicas, hotdogs, diapers, beer bottles, olive oil, and peanuts and employing every conceivable stratagem for the nominal draping of their more essentially private parts, 600,000 nature lovers, seventy five million tons of flesh, black, white, and yellow, converge on this narrow strip on a good Sunday, occupying it to its last square foot of hot dun coloured sand.”¹⁰²

Olympic Park had no competitive option but to construct its own waterside equivalent and Herman Schmidt declared that he would construct “The Largest Swimming Pool in the East.” Construction began in February 1923 and the

¹⁰² Fortune Magazine, 'To Heaven By Subway (Fortune Classics August 1938)', in *fortune.com* <www.fortune.com> [accessed April 2018]

construction statistics were immense. The site used was the old racetrack and the pool dimensions were four hundred feet long and two hundred feet wide. It displaced over 26,000 tons of soil and rocks and took nearly four million gallons of water to fill. At its peak it took up to five thousand bathers where, according to its own advertising, “they can enjoy a swim without overcrowding.”¹⁰³ It was surrounded by eighteen thousand tons of white Rockaway beach sand and had spectator seating for a further five thousand people for gala swimming events. It opened on 4 July 1923 and was an unsurprising instant success with the visitors. The pool was financed through a public offering of shares in the “Olympic Natatorium Corporation” that was particularly targeted at small investors in Irvington and Newark. The initial cost of constructing the pool is estimated at 300,000 dollars, which was more than recouped over its lifetime, yet many of the small investors never saw a return on their investment. The pool was almost instantly beset by economic problems initially caused by a trolley strike that lasted all the way through August and into September of 1923. With attendance levels cut dramatically, combined with the enormous cost of construction, maintenance and interest costs, the pool quickly built up huge debts. It is estimated to have lost over 156,000 dollars during the second half of the 1920’s.

The pool was used for more than just everyday bathing with swimming demonstrations by the soon to be legendary movie star of Tarzan fame, Johnny

¹⁰³ Alan A. Siegel, *Smile A Picture History of Olympic Park 1887-1965* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), p. 84.

Weissmuller, scuba diving introductory lessons, a setting for beauty pageants, the mandatory place for beginner's swimming lessons for Irvington's school children, Hawaiian themed parties, and diving displays. Two of the more esoteric pursuits were the sand sculptures in the Rockaway sand depicting children's cartoon characters designed and produced by Charles Chadwyke of East Orange. The other was the world record attempt for the longest recorded submerged scuba dive. Ernest J Stevens, known as "Red," managed to stay submerged for 31 hours and 10 minutes and broke the record in the pool in 1958.

In this piece written by a local resident, Marie Cahill Cooney, she gives a very personal insight into this park with its new mechanised rides,

"Life in Irvington in the twenties and early thirties was typically small-town despite the building boom then underway. Few families owned automobiles, but trolley car and train connections made an occasional boat ride up the Hudson River or a trip to Coney Island or the Jersey Shore possible. More often, however, Olympic Park was the focus of our recreational activities.

Preparations for our weekly visit to the park included Sunday best dress up...and now came the rides and games. Depending on our ages, we rode the rollercoaster, ponies, Whip, merry-go-round, Dodgem or Ferris wheel or played a variety of skill games...we walked towards the games of chance...Nine times out of ten, we would win a basket of groceries, or sugar or coffee, a smoked ham,

bacon and eggs, leather goods, a clock or a watch, a canary in a cage, kewpie dolls (some dressed in feathered headdresses with hula skirts that wiggled), boxes of chocolate candy and on and on. Of all my childhood memories those Sundays at Olympic Park, a half century ago, remain vivid still.”¹⁰⁴

Whilst memory can and does endow the past with a rose-tinted hue the core of this recollection does appear to reflect the true nature of this park across the decades of the 1920’s and 1930’s. This is especially true of the 1930’s and its associated economic depression when it was common for the fripperies of prizes such as Kewpie Dolls and their like to give way too much needed staples such as eggs, bacon, sugar and coffee as prizes. Again, the park was seen to adapt to the changing fortunes and needs of its local customers. It was also aware of its place within the community and ensured that very local residents who endured the sounds and smells of the park received free passes to its attractions. The more affluent members of the catchment area continued to visit the park but ostentatious displays of wealth were publicly frowned upon during the recession.

The severity of the Great Depression is reflected in the park’s attendance figures that peaked, for the 1930 season, at over one million but just three years later were down by over a quarter. Olympic’s business model was not predicated on markets declining by over twenty five percent, investment was curtailed and

¹⁰⁴ Alan A. Siegel, *Smile A Picture History of Olympic Park 1887-1965* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), p. 168.

the time between “paint overs” was extended. To help to combat the effects of this economic depression the management of the park had to reduce the price of entry to the swimming pool to attempt to stabilise visitor numbers.

“...Admission fees were cut nearly in half. Sunday swimming was reduced to 55 cents. Towels and swimsuits were rented for a dime.”¹⁰⁵

Olympic Park, faced with these huge drops in visitor numbers and revenues, had to look for new ways to generate gate receipts, some of which were contrary to the more genteel personality of the park. One of these innovations was the introduction of the “walkathon” or the “dance marathon.” The first one started in September 1932 with fifty-eight couples signing up to compete in this contest. The concept was simple, to dance continuously over twenty-four hours with just a thirty-minute break each day and a requirement to dance for at least forty-five minutes for every hour on the dance floor, which meant the contestants were dancing for seventeen and a half hours each day. The contest was billed to last three thousand five hundred hours, a total of over 145 days. By Christmas time only eleven couples survived and by February only five contestants remained, two couples and one woman who had had a violent disagreement with her male partner on the dance floor. The reward for this endeavour was a first prize of \$500 going down to a \$100 for the fifth couple. The pathos of this gruelling event was

¹⁰⁵ Alan A. Siegel, *Smile A Picture History of Olympic Park 1887-1965* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), pp. 83-84.

sharply accentuated when the promoter of the event, Ed Coronati, absconded with the prize money.¹⁰⁶

The audiences for this spectacle were huge and came from as far afield as Philadelphia, Trenton and New York. Weeknight seats were charged at a \$1.00 each and weekend nights at \$1.50. Goods in kind were accepted as depression level entrance fees in the first week with products ranging from canned goods to boxes of cereals bartered for seats. The one and a half tons of food collected were distributed to the poor of the area, again displaying the park management's manipulative understanding of their local customer base. As a spectacle it was all but ignored by the local newspapers but radio did cover the event, although generally it was viewed as a very tasteless form of entertainment, likened to a replacement of the traditional amusement park freak shows. Olympic Park had spent many years evolving away from the more prurient and macabre freak sideshow attractions and the elite media view was that the staging of the marathon dances was a retrogressive step. Only one further marathon was promoted in the park in 1935 and that event was also marred, this time by an unexplained attempted suicide of two teenage fans that tried to poison themselves with iodine. Released much later in 1969, this pathetic dance spectacle was made famous by Sydney Pollack's iconic 1930's based film, *They Shoot Horses Don't They?*

¹⁰⁶ Alan A. Siegel, *Smile A Picture History of Olympic Park 1887-1965* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), p. 106.

However at the end of the 1930's the real shooting had just begun in Europe with the outbreak of World War II on 1 September 1939, which lasted until 2 September 1945. Following the bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese in December 1941 and the declaration of war on the United States by the European Axis powers, the United States was coerced into the war. This re-inflated the home economy, reduced the massive unemployment levels from the Great Depression and committed the country into an era of phenomenal economic growth. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the rejuvenation of Olympic Park's fortunes. Alan A. Siegel, a local historian observed,

“Soldiers monopolizing the shooting gallery for ‘busman’s holidays’ civilians throwing balls at Japanese crockery and effigies of Hitler, Hirohito and Mussolini, bicyclists pedalling in from the provinces – all are wartime aspects of Olympic Park...With business better than at the same time a year ago, probably because of the park’s accessibility by bus from anywhere in North Jersey, the management has been admitting service men and women of all military branches gratuitously to the park and its swimming pool.”¹⁰⁷

This revival of the park's fortunes culminated in 1945 with the 4 July celebrations attracting a colossal 105,000 visitors, one of the largest single day receipts in the park's history. The war had ironically been a force for good for the park. Visitor

¹⁰⁷ Alan A. Siegel, *Smile A Picture History of Olympic Park 1887-1965* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), p. 117.

numbers were strong and married service brides with husbands overseas were working at munitions plants and had increased disposable incomes to spend in the park on emotive and faux patriotic sideshows such as *Mow Down The Jap*.

It was at this point that Henry Guenther's son, Robert, began to take over the reins of the business and he reinforced the traditional values and standards of the park by immediately declaring that no female over the age of fifteen would be allowed to wear shorts into the park and that males were still required to wear ties. The general relaxation of behavioural standards throughout the Second World War would not be reflected in this traditional park. In many ways the park became a refuge from the growing hostilities of urban life, almost a place of white sanctity. Maintenance and gardening crews were forever upgrading the park and cleaning personnel ensured that a staff of twelve picked up every piece of litter. This was ten years before Walt Disney tried to introduce the same service levels to Disneyland, Robert M Weinstein writes,

“It was no secret that Walt Disney had an intense dislike of Coney Island and what he thought it represented – dirty, disorganised, poorly run, garish, honky-tonk amusement parks.”¹⁰⁸

None of Walt Disney's criticisms could be aimed at Olympic Park and according to *Billboard* magazine the park grossed receipts of \$700,000 dollars in 1949, just over seven million dollars at 2016 prices. Despite these encouraging revenue

¹⁰⁸ Raymond J. Weinstein, 'Disneyland and Coney Island: Reflections on the Evolution of the Modern Amusement Park', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 26 (1992), pp. 131-65.

figures the park did have an unrecorded aspect to it that would contribute to its eventual downfall and closure.

Institutional racism was rife in the park and it was certainly not the only amusement park in the United States that maintained a Jim Crow segregation/exclusion ethos. The segregation of races was at this point a socially accepted and acceptable facet of white elitism. This racist approach is even more incredible in that it was from a town that emancipated its last four African slaves ten years prior to the outbreak of the American Civil War. The expositions in Chicago and Buffalo at the end of the nineteenth century had always conducted racial exclusion and segregation and this approach was continued within the burgeoning amusement park industry. The expositions had “black only” days for the *Midway* and for the halls of education and industry. Coney Island had a segregated area in front of the municipal baths where “there is a certain amount of fried chicken wrapped in oilpaper.”¹⁰⁹ Olympic Park excluded African-Americans and in a close examination of hundreds of photographic images of the park it is impossible to identify a single black face other than the minstrel entertainers.

There was, however, one sideshow where black men were represented and that could be seen with the *African Dip* concession where black-faced white men were given the agency to call out to the strolling crowds lines like “hey buddy

¹⁰⁹ Fortune Magazine, 'To Heaven By Subway (Fortune Classics August 1938)', in *fortune.com* <www.fortune.com> [accessed April 2018]

that's not the same girl that you were with last weekend" or "that guy doesn't look like he could hit the side of a barn."¹¹⁰ The retribution, for ten cents, was that the incensed passer-by got three balls to aim at a target to try to drop the loud-mouthed black-faced offender into a tank of water. There had been a number of amusement park examples of this type of sideshow attraction variously called, *The Dunk Tank*, *The Darktown Tangoes*, *The Chocolate Drops* and the *Dip*. Olympic Park's "African Dip" reached further unexplored depths, as up to this point African Americans had manned these attractions yet it appears that only in Olympic Park did black-faced white men represent the targets. The question of whether Olympic was afraid to let African Americans into the park, even as targets, or whether this was meant to be a racial compromise on a money-making concession is unclear, although on the evidence its likely to be the former suggestion. Regarding racism in the parks Eleanor Jordan, a childhood resident of Louisville Kentucky, the birthplace of one of the country's leading civil rights activists, Mohammed Ali, then Cassius Clay, sums up what it was like to be a black child in 1950's United States of America,

"Whenever we passed that amusement park...you see the lights, the big Ferris wheel that had green lights on it. And we would always ask the same question: 'Can we go?' And my mother and father would almost simultaneously say, 'No you can't.' We'd kind of sit there,

¹¹⁰ Alan A. Siegel, *Smile A Picture History of Olympic Park 1887-1965* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), p. 116.

and as we passed it, we'd say, 'Well why can't we go?' And that's when there was a deafening silence in the car. And my mother's eyes would feel up with tears, and my father would just kind of look away, and we knew something was wrong."¹¹¹

In a further reflection of this feeling of racial exclusion in the parks Martin Luther King expressed his very personal view in the 1963 *Letter From Birmingham Jail* recalling a conversation with his daughter Yolanda,

"When you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you explain to your six year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on the television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told FunTown is closed to colored children...then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait."¹¹²

Racial segregation and the advance of the civil rights movement throughout the 1950's and 1960's were major factors in the closure of many parks including Olympic Park, which begrudgingly desegregated in the 1950's. The key problem was that the previously all white, European heritage suburbs such as Irvington were now being populated by African-Americans, a market that Olympic Park had openly shunned and one to which it apparently could not adapt.

¹¹¹ Interview with Eleanor Jordan by Betty Brinson, 3 February 1999 transcript Kentucky Oral History Commission, pp. 2-3.

¹¹² Victoria W. Wolcott, *Race, Riots and Roller Coasters: The Struggle over Segregated Recreation in America* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), p. 1.

However this was not the only factor that heralded the demise of the parks. In many ways a series of unrelated factors produced a perfect storm that Olympic Park and others could not possibly withstand.

Another of the major factors that contributed to the demise of the park was the New Jersey's August 1950 anti-gambling legislation that was championed by J. Elmer Hausmann, the state's Public Safety Director. The legislation prohibited "games of chance" from operating in the parks. These statutes stopped the "*Wheel of Fortune*" and pinball style games and however much the owners of these concessions adapted and reconfigured the games to increase the elements of skill they were still outlawed by the State. At a stroke it is estimated by Judith A. Adams that this cost the park "no less than 40 percent of the park's revenues."¹¹³ This was a financial loss that most businesses would have had difficulty in overcoming let alone a seasonal and fair weather business under enormous attack from societal changes affecting every aspect of American life.

Coincidentally a new demographic definition was introduced, "the teenager." This child of the baby boomers was now an important self-identifying economic group with a high disposable income and enough free time in which to spend it. Jon Savage wrote in *Teenage: The Creation of Youth Culture* that by as early as 1944,

¹¹³ Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p. 70.

“American youth had a spending capacity of \$750 million; untold riches awaited those who plugged into this virtually untapped market.”¹¹⁴

However like all opportunities, the arrival of this new demographic group also carried threats. These were children who had grown up in the environs of the park. They had learnt to swim in the gigantic pool, they most probably had their first kiss on a “dark ride,” had ridden the roller coaster and were as much a product of their high school peers as they were of their parents. For them the freedom, speed and convenience of their own cars were more than a match for the *Cyclone* or the *Jack Rabbit* roller coaster. This is echoed in an article in the *Newark Evening News* in 1964 where the writer stated,

“ The roller coaster and the putt-putts don’t mean so much so a suburban teenager who has his own car by the time he graduates from high school. He has new frontiers – the shore, the lakes and New York City.”

As a generation they were the first identifiable television audience with programme makers and advertising specialists appealing to this new, influential and affluent target market. In 1952 Olympic Park introduced the Tele-Theatre to the park containing seven large screen televisions to entertain the young. This strategy of embracing the competition failed miserably and it closed after just one

¹¹⁴ Jon Savage, *Teenage: The Creation of Youth Culture* (London: Pimlico Books Random House, 2008).

year. At this point television was a very home based, family pursuit and it was this threat of the home becoming the entertainment hub that most worried the owners of Olympic Park.

In August 1953 Henry Guenther, the owner and driving force of Olympic Park's early success died. He had purchased the park from the Home Brewing Company in 1919 for \$100,000. He was another of the host of amusement park innovators and developers that created this iconic industry of mass entertainment: George Tilyou of Steeplechase Park, Frederic Thompson and Elmer 'Skip' Thompson of Luna Park, Walter Knott of Knotts Berry Farm and George A. Boeckling of Cedar Point, Sandusky Ohio to name but a few all of which blazed a trail long before Walter Elias Disney arrived on the scene in the mid 1950's. It needed an assured zeitgeist to appreciate the needs and demands of the consumers and an acute understanding of the potential visitor that sometimes ran through generations in amusement park operating families.

Gunter's sons, Robert and Henry Jr, took over the running of Olympic Park for the 1954 season and although imbued with the character of the park they were never able to emulate the success of their father and relied on bringing to the park far more tried and tested rides. Robert believed that, due to the park's location next to the newly completed Garden State Freeway, the park's future was assured. Almost from the beginning of their tenure the rumours of the park's imminent closure were rife and this adversely affected the park's attendance figures.

The park finally closed at the end of the 1965 season which had ominously started on 1 May with a teenage riot of more than three hundred youths damaging concessions and rides within the park and private housing in its environs.

“By the mid 1960’s, it had become a hang-out for gangs of urban youth from nearby Newark and was the site in May 1965 of a riot in which the participants spread out into neighbouring residential areas, smashing windows and vandalizing property.”¹¹⁵

This was almost the last straw for the Guenther family and they at last released the plans to redevelop the site as a residential housing project of three 21-story luxury apartment blocks at an estimated cost of some \$3.5 million. This scheme was never bought to fruition and the site, following the closure of the park on the 7 September 1965, lay untouched for a further fourteen years until it was developed into light industrial units in 1979. But the question still existed as to why the Guenther family choose 1965 in which to close.

Certainly the value of land had risen considerably during the late 1950’s and early 1960’s to the point where the return on an acre of land outmatched a viable crowd on a Sunday in the park. It is highly likely that the Guenther family and their advisors had foreseen the future of Irvington as one of a changing racial profile residential neighbourhood. Up to the 1960’s the town had comprised of predominantly white, European heritage Americans. What happened

¹¹⁵ John Hannigan, *Fantasy City: Pleasure and Profit in the Postmodern Metropolis* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 1998), p. 46.

subsequently was that the trickle of African-Americans into this area became more marked, especially following the Newark Race Riots of 1967. Black families sought refuge in the security of Irvington just a few miles from the centre of the disturbances. From research in the town archives the following population profiles are evident in the following table:

Irvington Town Population and Ethnicity Data

Census Year	Population	% Non-White
1950	59,201	0
1960	59,379	0
1970	59,743	20%
1980	61,493	40%
1990	61,018	70%
2000	60,695	82%
2010	53,926	85%

Irvington transmogrified from having an exclusively white population in 1965 to a town just three decades later where the white population was in a minority. This new potential market was one that the Olympic Park management had forcibly excluded and consciously ignored and ridiculed throughout its history and it did not appear to want to serve this new African-American audience. This was another major reason for not carrying on the running of the park.

“A closer look at Olympic Park...demonstrates that social changes and increasing affluence paradoxically led to the irreversible decay of most of the traditional parks by the mid 1950’s.”¹¹⁶

The combined effects of a change in management, the pressures of legislative powers on revenues, changes in societal profiles, the ever increasing need to revitalize the parks through massive financial investment, the growing challenge of competitors for the available leisure time, the rising value of residential land, described by Jim Futrell as “skyrocketing”¹¹⁷ and a new unaffiliated local population profile meant that the park’s closure appeared inevitable. Add to these factors the need for the park to recognise more union based employment on fixed rates and as a business it was no longer viable. In an article in the *Maplewood News-Record* in October 1965 Robert Guenther is quoted as saying,

“Why is Olympic closing? There’s no basic reason. But rising land values are a part of it. And there were a number of operating problems he said. Also he had lost some of his old enthusiasm in recent years.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p. 66.

¹¹⁷ Jim Futrell, *Amusement Parks of New Jersey* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2004), p. 37.

¹¹⁸ Alan A. Siegel, *Smile A Picture History of Olympic Park 1887-1965* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), p. 167.

Another reporter in the *Newark News* in September 1965 speaking of Olympic Park wrote,

“Surviving long after it had become an anachronism, it was the last of many amusement parks, large and small, which once furnished Essex County with much of its summertime recreation...

The early parks were decorous, inexpensive and family-centred, with leafy groves, unpretentious gardens and many places to sit down. It was no coincidence in the pre-motor age that each was built at the end of a trolley line equipped in summer with open cars.

A generation that can be diverted by nothing less than a Disneyland accepts their oblivion with equanimity. But those who remember childhood, spent in that slower, quieter and less affluent era brush away a nostalgic tear.”¹¹⁹

The rides were sold off and ironically the *Liberty Carousel* was sold to the Walt Disney Corporation for its Walt Disney World Resort in Florida where it remains to this day. When academics endeavoured to draw distinct lines between amusement parks and theme parks this park often crossed the demarcation definition. Olympic Park had displayed for decades all of the social characteristics that Walt Disney was to set as goals for his endeavour in California. Yet Olympic Park remained consciously an amusement park until its

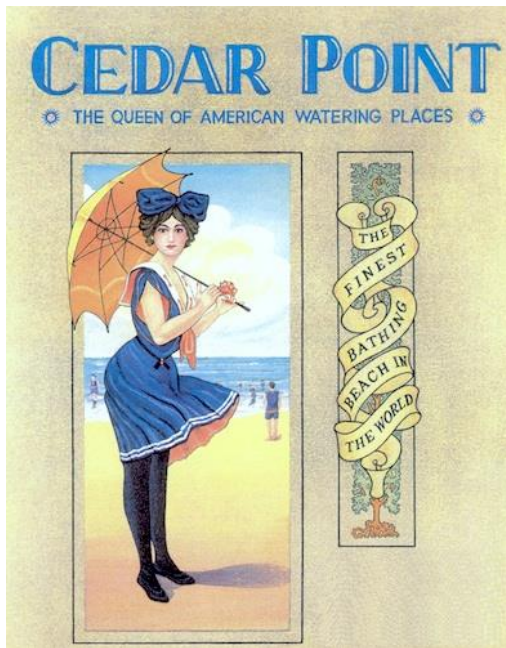
¹¹⁹ Alan A. Siegel, *Smile A Picture History of Olympic Park 1887-1965* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), p, 167.

closure. Without doubt Olympic Park's core legacy and values live on in Disneyland and its associated ventures. Olympic Park's customer-focussed belief was that if the visitor was treated with respect and courtesy then the visitor would respond with higher levels of repeat visits and higher individual spends. The line between the two outdoor ventures, amusement parks and theme parks, is not as clear-cut as academics profess.

For Olympic Park a new socio-economic group of African-Americans arrived and populated Olympic Park's immediate urban catchment area of Irvington and Maplewood and dramatically changed the racial profile of this traditionally white suburb. These African-Americans had moved to Irvington to escape the riots occurring in nearby Newark, New Jersey. They were a social group that up until the late 1950's that were excluded and even ridiculed within Olympic Park itself. As was evidenced in many urban population models in North America the waves of ethnic settlement tended to radiate outwards over time. The poorest migrant groups started in the centre of the city mainly servicing the elite classes and as they became established and ultimately more affluent they moved outwards geographically towards more open spaces, less urban violence, better paid jobs and more affordable housing. This population model was one of the key reasons why Olympic Park failed. It had simply lost contact with its traditional core white European heritage visitors who had migrated out of the area on their own population ripple in a typical example of "white flight" and had been replaced by the African-American socio economic group. This social change

meant that Olympic Park lost its core visitor, the casual purchase, predominantly white and local Sunday afternoon visitor and was seemingly unprepared to amuse the introduction of the African-American demographic group.

Section 6: Cedar Point



“Someone ought to erect a bathing-house on the lake side of Cedar Point. There is no finer spot for bathing in the world than the spot mentioned.”¹²⁰

This highly prescient quote was featured in the *Sandusky Register* on 17 July 1867. It took less than three years for the prediction to become a reality, for in the spring of 1870, an enterprising German immigrant, Louis Zistel, opened a beer garden, dance floor and the first bathhouse on the current site of Cedar Point Ohio, a venue that would be transformed into one of North America’s leading resort and amusement park attractions. Until the middle of the nineteenth century this remote site in Ohio had been a place of liminal wilderness frequented mainly by hunters and fishermen. During the American Civil War in the 1860’s it was the ideal site of a jail for captured confederate soldiers and for a manned lighthouse, steering shipping away from its promontory shores. Louis Zistel’s original employment was as the boatman who used to ferry the confederate

¹²⁰ Sandusky Register, 'The Sandusky Register', *The Sandusky Register*, 1867.

prisoners to the jail and only began to run twenty-five cent daily excursion trips to Cedar Point following the end of the war.

Cedar Point's closest population centre was the town of Sandusky in northern Ohio nearly 5 miles away, reachable only by ferry across Lake Erie. At first this isolation, away from major population conurbations, could have been assessed as a major business weakness, especially during cyclical periods of economic recession, but had actually proved to be the reason for Cedar Point's long time sustainability. Hugo Hildebrandt, Marketing Director of Cedar Point, reviewing the twentieth century history of the amusement park and resort makes particular reference to the importance of the park's location.

“As things turned out, however, Cedar Point was lucky to be where it is. It never would have been revitalized had it been located within big city limits.”¹²¹

This chapter will examine in detail the development of Cedar Point and how it weathered the same overall economic conditions as Olympic Park and other amusement parks yet went on to succeed whereas Olympic Park and many others failed.

Although nestled on the banks of Lake Erie in this near rural idyll and initially reachable only by ferry, Cedar Point was, however, at a very enviable commercial crossroads between the growing population centres of Detroit, Cleveland, Akron,

¹²¹ Hugo John Hildebrandt, 'Cedar Park: A Park in Progress', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 15 (1981), pp. 87-106.

Pittsburgh and Toledo. It had a huge and growing potential visitor market within reach of its sandy shores.

In the chart below, the years depicted in green show positive decade upon decade of growth of population in the five key population centres situated around Cedar Point. Conversely red indicates a decade upon decade of decline in population. This northerly Midwest area boomed until the 1960's when the western seaboard states began to attract skilled migrants especially to the new technology cities in California, Oregon and Washington. In the 1960's, another changing economic population pressure was the decline of local heavy industries, such as the manufacture of automobiles in Detroit, which relocated out of the United States to countries with cheaper production costs. For Cedar Point this massive population growth, throughout the Golden Age of amusement parks up to 1929 and even through the years of recession up to World War II fuelled the critical business requirement of increased numbers of visitors to the park. Following World War II, Cedar Point was faced with a declining local population base. This necessitated changing its target market to a much more national and international visitor and one that was more aligned with the Disney marketing approach with its new theme parks.

Population Figures For Sandusky Detroit Cleveland Akron Pittsburgh and Toledo 1890 - 2000

YEAR	SANDUSKY	DETROIT	CLEVELAND	AKRON	PITTSBURGH	TOLEDO
1890	18,471	205,876	261,353	27,601	238,167	81,434
1900	19,664	285,704	381,768	42,728	321,616	131,822
1910	19,989	465,766	560,663	69,067	533,905	168,497
1920	22,897	465,766	796,841	208,435	588,343	243,617
1930	24,622	993,678	900,429	255,040	669,817	290,718
1940	24,878	1,623,452	878,336	244,791	671,659	282,349
1950	29,375	1,849,568	914,808	274,605	676,806	303,616
1960	31,989	1,670,144	876,050	290,351	604,332	318,003
1970	32,674	1,514,063	750,879	275,425	520,089	383,062
1980	31,360	1,203,386	573,822	237,177	423,959	354,635
1990	29,764	1,027,974	505,616	223,019	369,879	332,943
2000	27,844	951,270	478,403	217,074	334,563	313,679

Source. www.worldpopulationreview.com

KEY: Green Decades of Growth: Red Decades Of Decline

The first clear indication of a demographic difference between the two parks of Olympic Park and Cedar Point is that Cedar Point could not have survived as a local resort location just for the town of Sandusky itself. The town, over time, doubled its population to a peak of 32,674 in the 1970's but this was far too small a base to sustain a major resort focussed amusement park in the long term. Cedar Point relied on the conurbations that surrounded it for its core visitors - Pittsburgh 182 miles, Detroit 110 miles, Akron 89 miles, Cleveland 62 miles and Toledo 63 miles away. This was a central difference between Olympic Park and Cedar Point. Olympic Park was a visitor destination for an occasional daily or weekend visit by a local person whereas a stay at Cedar Point's lakeside resort was more of a longer stay, luxury holiday style visit, somewhere for the whole of the family to enjoy. The capital cost of a visit to Cedar Point was therefore much higher and the visitor's demands and expectations were much greater too.

In 1897, following a series of different ownership structures, Louis Zistel's original beer garden venture was bought by the Lake Erie and Western Railroad who appointed George A. Boeckling, an Indiana born businessman and entrepreneur of German extraction, as General Manager. He had studied the development of Coney Island from rabbit infested sand dunes into a world-renowned outdoor entertainment venue and had no business qualms about attempting the juxtaposition of Coney Island style cutting edge entertainment technology in a rural location on the end of a peninsular on one of the Great Lakes. Lake Erie and Western Railroad paid a massive \$256,000 for the site, an

estimated \$7.5 million at today's value. This huge investment underpinned the serious nature of Boeckling and his financial backer's belief in the venture. Judith A. Adams compares Boeckling to the leading amusement park visionaries of the time,

“With a flair much like that of George C. Tilyou and Thompson and Dundy of Coney Island, Boeckling was the force behind the creation of Cedar Point as one of the nation's finest resorts.”¹²²

In academic writings on Cedar Point there is some conflict as to the ownership structure. Many state, including Judith A. Adams¹²³ that Boeckling purchased the resort, yet in fact he was the General Manager appointed by the railroad company using their initial investment. He was however the driving force behind the development of the Amusement Circle using his own money for this addition to the resort. This pro-amusement park view ascribed to Boeckling is however contested,

“Although he thought amusement parks were common and not on the same level with his resort, Boeckling could not deny the profits to be made from rides and games.”¹²⁴

¹²² Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p. 78.

¹²³ Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p. 78.

¹²⁴ David W. DeMali Francis and Diane DeMali Francis, *Images of America Cedar Point* (Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2004), p. 67.

In the initial period of his stewardship he concentrated on building and rebuilding the hotel infrastructure of the resort, every time improving and enhancing the visitor experience. The construction programme was extensive and included building the Bay Shore Hotel in 1899, the 55 room White House in 1901, the now historic 600 room Breakers Hotel in 1905, the Coliseum in 1906 and the rebuilt and renamed White House as the Cedars Hotel in 1915.

The visitors required high standards of accommodation and a variety of attractions that could occupy a family for the much longer period of days rather than hours. This was contrary to their more moderate expectation of a visit to a local “Sunday afternoon” amusement park.

“ The best rooms in the Cedars Hotel faced the bay and cost just \$2 a day per person or 12,25 per week. By comparison, a lakefront room in Breakers was \$3.50 a day and a first-floor parlour room were \$10 a day. All rooms were ‘furnished in attractive and comfortable style,’ although the Cedars offered no private baths.”¹²⁵

All of this development required enormous levels of investment, yet his financial strategy paid off with the achieved 1903 profit figure of \$110,000. These figures were achieved without the introduction of a co-ordinated amusement

¹²⁵ David W. Demali Francis and Diane Demali Francis, *Images of America Cedar Point* (Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2004), p. 62.

park, which came after the introduction of a resort dedicated electric power plant built in 1906.

As a lakeside summer resort the visitors still held an expectation that there were diversions at the site. Cedar Point had children's swings, slides, see-saws and a manual carousel whilst still a rudimentary beer garden and dance floor. The first amusement ride at Cedar Point was actually built long before what was to become known as the "Boeckling Era." In 1890 a water toboggan was constructed to propel bathers into the lake and was a version of Coney's Luna Park's *Shoot the Chutes*. The following year the *Switchback Railway* was introduced. It stood 25-foot high and achieved speeds of up to 10 miles per hour. It consisted of two parallel slides, one for the descent and the other for manually hauling the cars back up by the attendants for the next ride. The operational limitations of the *Switchback Railway* are obvious and in 1902 the site's second roller coaster was introduced, *The Figure Eight Roller Toboggan*. This ride negated the need to manually haul the cars back to the top of the ride and delivered the riders back to their start point. This was to begin a long and very special Cedar Point relationship with the roller coaster, eventually winning Cedar Point the epithet of the "Roller Coaster Capital of the World." In the promotional illustration at the beginning of this chapter it is evident that this location was to be hailed as "The Queen of American Watering Places" and "The Finest Bathing Beach in the World." There is no mention of amusement attractions or Midways at this time.

Whilst it had attractions and rides Cedar Point was first and foremost a bathing resort with no real dedicated and cohesive Midway area until the building of the Amusement Circle in 1906. Olympic Park had had to artificially construct, at vast cost, its waterside facility as an adjunct to its already established amusement area, as a result of which Cedar Point had a clear natural advantage. This was not the only geographical advantage that Cedar Point had over Olympic Park.

Key to the success of any amusement park, in this early period, was its ease and cheapness of accessibility. The huge increase in electrified trolley lines brought with it a commensurate increase in end of the line, urban Trolley Parks. Many American cities had two or three such parks. At Cedar Point the nature of its more challenging accessibility, across Lake Erie, became a unique experience selling point rather than a hindrance in its promotional materials. This was to be no traditional end of the line destination and initially it had no railhead servicing a series of major railways. In 1907 the first Cedar Point dedicated steamship, *The Eastland*, was put into service. The ship was in service for six years and in its last year it is estimated to have carried over 200,000 visitors to Cedar Point. Following its decommissioning it was moved to the Chicago River where tragically in 1915 it overturned with the loss of over 800 lives. In 1909 a new ferry, the *G. A. Boeckling*, was launched and two further ferries, the *R. B. Hayes* and the *A. Wehrle Jr*, to manage the growing crowds, supplemented this service.

The management were aware of the growing importance of the car in generating visitor traffic. The first causeway road to the resort was built in

1914/15 and on Independence Day 1916 an estimated 2,000 cars travelled the road from the mainland to the resort. The Lake Shore Electric Railway was another access point to the resort serving Toledo, Cleveland, Lorain and Elyria with a fast dedicated service to the lakeside where visitors would board the ferries for the final leg of the journey. Hugo John Hildebrandt later observed in his 1981 article of the attractiveness of Cedar Point as a desirable destination and trains as a method of access,

“ Train excursions were also very popular. One excursion from Akron in 1915 consisted of fifteen sections of ten coaches each – 18,000 people. All were Goodyear employees and their families.”¹²⁶

Cedar Point’s unique location again meant that its success and development ran contrary to the accepted norms in terms of amusement park access. The resort required constant investment in such infrastructure schemes to maintain and grow its visitor numbers. The benefit for Cedar Point was the longer stay and the visitor’s need for accommodation that other daytrip venues did not have to provide. In one way Cedar Point enhanced the opportunity of the visitor spending more money over a longer period but on the other hand it came at a huge infrastructure costs.

The scale of this investment is evident in the Breakers Hotel constructed in 1905. It had six hundred rooms, many with internal water systems, an almost

¹²⁶ Hugo John Hildebrandt, 'Cedar Park: A Park in Progress', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 15 (1981), pp. 87-106.

unheard of luxury at the time. The corridors were wide and airy allowing the constant flow of ozone rich air into the hotel. It housed the now famous five storey high, rotunda grand lobby, which was elaborately decorated with Tiffany crafted stained glass windows and chandeliers by the company's leading glass cutter Louis Buser. The excellent acoustics of this vast lobby area provided a natural stage for the opera singers Dame Nellie Melba and Enrico Caruso in which to perform informal cultural concerts. These impromptu concerts underpin the cultural elitism that existed at the park yet there was still room for more populist entertainment too.

As with Olympic Park, Cedar Point attracted the crowds through a plethora of cultural and spectator events. These included classical concerts, opera, theatre and dance through to boxing, sports, and spectacular spectator events. One of the biggest crowd generating events was the attempt at breaking the world long distance air record for the longest flight over water. At the time this record was held by Bleriot with his 1909 flight over the English Channel but was broken on a sunny day by Glenn H. Curtiss who flew from Euclid Beach, to the east of Cleveland, to Cedar Point, a distance of 64 miles and was watched by over 15,000 visitors to Cedar Point. This was a huge promotional success for Cedar Point and firmly established the resort as an exciting place to visit in the minds of the American public. The final point of irony of this event was that the flight's departure point was Cleveland's Euclid Beach which had its own amusement park but that too closed as with Olympic Park in the 1960's due to its, "lack of

visitors, rowdy teenage behaviour and rising taxes.”¹²⁷ Cedar Point’s isolation and exclusiveness again is seen to protect it from negative commercial and social influences.

Another innovation during this initial period was the launch of cinema at the resort. As with Olympic Park’s attempt to nullify the lure of home based television with its large screen Tele Theatre, Cedar Point in the main theatre screened almost continuously, *The Great Train Robbery*,¹²⁸ recognised as the first western film with a full narrative. This movie was screened every day throughout the entire 1905 season. Again it was an attempt to embrace and include one of its key competitors, cinema, for leisure time. Although cinema was not a traditional active amusement park leisure pursuit the final clip of this film with Justice D. Barnes firing a gun directly at the camera forced the filmgoer to duck and become an active part of the spectacle. James Chapman the media analyst and historian believed this scene was the inspiration for the iconic James Bond opening sequences for every film in the franchise.¹²⁹

An irony of this cinematic innovation was that a very young Sam Warner and his brother Albert were working at Cedar Point at this time. They saw the potential of the film and decided to buy a print of the film for themselves and to tour the rural Midwest and southern states, screening the film in small townships,

¹²⁷ Kelly, 'Last Year For Euclid Beach?', *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 27 August 1965.

¹²⁸ *The Great Train Robbery*, dir. by Edwin S. Porter (You Tube, 1903).

¹²⁹ James Chapman, *Licence to Thrill: A Cultural History of the James Bond Films*. (London, England: I B Tauris, 2007), p. 61.

which were many miles from a cinema. The plan was a great success and formed the basis of a company that would, many years later, go on to buy the Six Flags amusement park enterprise and together with Time Incorporated they would become, well into the twenty first century, one of Cedar Point's major competitors. The production of a reliable source of energy was critical to the new cinema, sideshows, incandescent rides and maximised Cedar Point's opportunity to keep visitors happily occupied and freely spending into the night.

The building of a reliable dedicated electrical plant in 1906 provided Cedar Point with the necessary power to proceed with the second phase of Boeckling's plan for the resort, the "Boeckling Era," a dedicated amusement area. Electricity had been introduced to the site as early as 1891 yet was unreliable and was still to be utilised fully by the venue. Boeckling wanted to expand the resort into the Midwest's version of Coney Island using the very latest in outdoor entertainment mechanical technology. His fellow directors did not support this new business strategy and refused to allow the company's money to be invested in the scheme. Boeckling thought otherwise and invested his own money in establishing the first dedicated midway and amusement park on the site, which was named the Amusement Circle. In future years Boeckling was ascribed to have said "I made so much money, they (the Cedar Point directors) begged to let them in on it."¹³⁰ This quote is undocumented and possibly of doubtful authenticity. However true

¹³⁰ Great Lakes Historical Society, *Inland Seas*, 2 vols (Michigan: Great Lakes Historical Society, 1967), XXIII. 117.

or otherwise it underpins quite how successful this new Amusement Circle was to become in this Golden Age of amusement parks in America. This success is reflected in the profits generated by the revived Cedar Point when in 1908 the stated profits had grown to \$400,000. A large proportion of these profits were reinvested in Cedar Point, as Boeckling understood that change, development and enhancement were central to its success in attracting repeat visitors to the enterprise.

The first centrepiece ride of this new Amusement Circle was not a roller coaster but the *Circle Swing* which was built by the Pittsburgh based Ingersoll Engineering and Construction Company which had also built the *Figure Eight Roller Toboggan*. A rebuilt carousel was also erected in 1906. It was built by the T. M. Harton Company and featured a variety of animals all hand carved by the renowned Philadelphian wood carver, Daniel Muller. In 1912 The Harton Company went on to build the Erwin Vettel designed *Leap The Dips* roller coaster. This roller coaster was 4,500 foot long and each ride cost ten cents for a sense of speed that most riders had never experienced before. In traditional amusement park iconography, it was lit with thousands of coloured electric lights and provided an impressive evening attraction. An innovative aspect of Cedar Point's business strategy was that many of the rides were dismantled and rebuilt and renamed in new locations within the midway as with the *Figure Eight Toboggan* being repurposed to *The Racer* and the *Scenic Railway* being moved and renamed *The Leap Frog Railway*. This was a much cheaper alternative to

replacing these expensive existing rides with completely new experiences but the reconfigured rides had enough difference for the visitor to feel they were experiencing something new.

By 1906 the site of Cedar Point was already developed and established as an elite resort so from the outset Boeckling had to find the Amusement Circle a physical place within the existing hotels and bathhouses. Hildebrandt observes,

“The amusement park was a queer place. Purposefully, perhaps, there seemed to be no orderly arrangement of buildings, rides and other physical object. The result was a kind of pleasant disorientation.”¹³¹

This feeling of other-worldliness was also recognised by the visitor. In this case Miss Harriet M. Tamm, a local Sandusky resident, remembered,

“As you entered the ‘Midway’ at Cedar Point from the boat-landing, the first concession was the ‘*House of Horrors*.’ I never went in there, as it wasn’t to my liking; but from what I know it was a paying concession, as it seems people go for such thrills...An exceptional perilous thing was ‘*Leap the Dip*’ as it was so high, it was appalling to see it and of course another money making concession, as it took in a big area, for those people who like thrills.”¹³²

¹³¹ Hugo John Hildebrandt, 'Cedar Park: A Park in Progress', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 15 (1981), pp. 87-106.

¹³² David W. Francis, 'A Reminiscence of Old Cedar Point', *Northwest Ohio Quarterly*, XLIX (1976-77), pp. 9-10.

Boeckling had studied Coney Island's amusement parks and understood that this visitor feeling of discombobulation and disorientation was an essential element in the experience of an amusement park. In Judith A. Adams view "...the amusement park and midway were pure Coney Island."¹³³ One of the more outlandish aspects of Cedar Point was that it had a model village of Igorrotes from Luzon in the Philippines and was billed as an "ethnological exhibit" but in reality it was a thinly veiled freak show attraction. The Amusement Circle was a place where normal rules did not apply and participation and perceived risk taking were paramount for enjoyment. More prosaically it was economically impossible to dismantle the existing resort hotel infrastructure and start again from scratch. In this way the resort became a melange of high culture opera and theatre juxtaposed with exotic sideshows and dark rides like the *Tunnel of Love*. Therefore necessity was met with pragmatism with the seemingly disorderly juxtaposition of rides, entertainment and accommodation, all of which played to the inherent other-worldliness of an amusement park, a place where normal rules did not apply. The long accepted American 'block' nature of American towns and cities structure was replaced with a mystifying confusion and with consciously poor signage and surprises around every corner.

One of the less surprising results was that, with this level of investment in the revitalised resort and with its new Amusement Circle, Cedar Point began to

¹³³ Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p. 78.

generate even larger profits, they escalated to over \$1 million annually throughout the 1920's. This was, in the face of Prohibition, introduced in stages across the country throughout 1920's and lasted thirteen years, until 1933. For Olympic Park this was not an issue as it never sold alcohol but for Cedar Point, which had numerous dedicated bars and restaurants such as *The Grand Pavilion*, *The Cafeteria Moderne*, *The Grill Room*, *The Rathskeller*, *The Lobby Grill* and the famous *Crystal Rock Castle*, this lack of alcohol proved to be a major business challenge. The *Crystal Rock Castle* served cold, local Sandusky brewed Kuebler-Stang German style beer delivered in huge glass steins. Another reflection of the close regional German community of this rural area was that August Kuebeler Jr, the son of the brewer and the *Crystal Rock Castle* brewer, was one of Boeckling's "most trusted lieutenants."¹³⁴ All of the venues sold alcohol prior to Prohibition yet as seen by the profit figures already mentioned, Cedar Point appears not to have been adversely affected during the period of Prohibition. Its remote location and closeness to the bootleg Canadian breweries, just across Lake Erie, must have made it a prime outlet for illegal alcohol throughout this period of enforced abstinence. According to the David and Diane DeMali Francis,

“ George Boeckling lived in an apartment on the second floor of the Administration Building. During Prohibition, Federal Agents

¹³⁴ David W. DeMali Francis and Diane DeMali Francis, *Images of America Cedar Point* (Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2004), p. 23.

uncovered a sizeable stock of illegal liquor secreted away in the building for Boeckling's favoured guests."¹³⁵

A parallel to Olympic Park was that amidst the frenetic beach and amusement park areas there were oases of well-tended gardens and picnic points yet even here drinking water was scarce in order to stimulate beer and soft drink sales. Boeckling was never one to miss a sales opportunity.

As the 1920's were coming to a close Cedar Point built possibly its most iconic roller coaster, the Fred Church designed and Harry Traver constructed *Cyclone*. It was billed as "Scientifically built for speed,"¹³⁶ and was a fast, brutal ride that shook and physically bruised riders as they clung on down steep drops and around acute bends. It was almost a rite of passage amongst teenage visitors, yet few returned as "it beat you up some" but it continued in various revised forms throughout the twentieth century.¹³⁷ Built in 1929 it was the last major innovation and investment by Boeckling who died soon after in 1931 just as the Great Depression was wreaking havoc on the country's economy. Boeckling's death had huge ramifications for the business as had Herman Schmidt's and Henry Guenther's death at Olympic Park. The death of rare, visionary leaders in times

¹³⁵ David W. Demali Francis and Diane Demali Francis, *Images of America Cedar Point* (Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2004), p. 33.

¹³⁶ David W. DeMali Francis and Diane DeMali Francis, *Images of America Cedar Point* (Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2004), p. 69.

¹³⁷ David W. DeMali Francis and Diane DeMali Francis, *Images of America Cedar Point* (Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2004), p. 90.

of economic depression heralded the demise of many amusement parks across the country as the recession continued.

Hugo John Hildebrandt, the park's Marketing Director estimated that the number of amusement parks in the United States of America had fallen from a high of just over 1,500 in 1918 to 550 in the mid 1930's, a decrease of just under two thirds.¹³⁸ Gary Kyriazi estimated an even steeper drop to 500.¹³⁹ Judith A. Adams, using US Census and Business Census data believes the total number of amusement parks at their height, in the 1920's, was between 1,800 and 2,000 falling to just 245 at the beginning of World War II in Europe. According to Adams a massive eighty eight percent of the parks closed leaving a mere twelve percent to meet the challenges of the new "Theme Parks."¹⁴⁰ These drastic figures are sharply reflected in the fact that Cedar Point did not post a profit figure for the next seventeen years following Boeckling's death.

Given the immense economic pressures on the amusement park industry during this period of recession, combined with the increased competition for leisure time, it is incredible that any of the parks survived at all, yet they did and some like Cedar Point went on to become members of the exclusive United States Top Ten destinations by the end of the twentieth century. However in the

¹³⁸ Hugo John Hildebrandt, 'Cedar Park: A Park in Progress', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 15 (1981), pp. 87-106.

¹³⁹ Gary Kyriazi, *The Great American Amusement Parks A Pictorial History* (New Jersey: Castle Books, 1976), p.165.

¹⁴⁰ Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p.164.

intervening seventeen years standards began to slip even though the resort's new management strived to maintain the resort's quality experience,

“...the Hotel Breakers managed to keep its doors open. The condition of the hotel declined, however, and holes appeared in screens, paint flaked and ancient mattresses provided guests with numerous back aches.”¹⁴¹

In Cedar Point's Amusement Circle the *Tumble Bug* ride, a popular yet relatively conservative attraction, was installed and built by the Traver Engineering Company in 1934 and was to be one of the few new rides introduced into the Amusement Circle during the period of the recession. Many of the smaller rides and nearly all of the sideshows and smaller food outlets were family ran concessionary businesses which paid ground rent and sometimes a percentage of the profits to Cedar Point. The park provided the larger amusement ride projects but it was the responsibility of these smaller concessionaires to provide the affordable joy and fun to the visitors. Families such as John Berni and his wife ran the *Skeet Ball* and *Penny Arcade* and the T. M. Horton Company owned and ran the *Leap The Dips* roller coaster and the carousel. In 1922 the carousel had grossed \$3,500 dollars in a single season but by the mid 1930's the ticket receipts did not even cover the operating costs and by 1935 the *Leap the Dips* roller coaster was finally abandoned. In true amusement park parsimony it

¹⁴¹ David W. DeMali Francis and Diane DeMali Francis, *Images of America Cedar Point* (Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2004), p. 74.

was simply repurposed by new owners as the *High Frolics* roller coaster. In 1932 Frederick Posner had purchased the *Crystal Rock Castle* and due to the prevailing Prohibition changed it to a salt beef sandwich bar, waiting just twelve months until it was possible to sell beer once more at Prohibitions end. There was a continuing mutual relationship between the park and its small enterprising concessionaires, each relying on the other for their economic survival. This symbiotic relationship with smaller concessionaires has continued to contemporary times, although the massive capital cost of building highly complex leading-edge rides is now beyond the financial scope of the smaller operators.

It was imperative for the financial future of the park that new profitable revenue sources were found to ensure the survival of the park during this 1930's period. The answer came in the form of a new developing demographic, the younger, white more affluent children who, having lived through the recession, were looking for new entertainment outlets. For Cedar Point this came in the form of big band concerts and dances and the introduction of a new generation to the forgotten delights of Cedar Point. According to the DeMali Francis research in the Cedar Point Archives,

“The Big Band Era helped to keep Cedar Point's gates open during the late 1930's and early '40's. For the 1939 season Ed Smith renovated the ballroom and had it decorated in an art deco style. Over the next decade, the old Coliseum echoed the music of the nation's

top bands, including Benny Goodman, Glen Grey, Orrin Tucker, the Dorseys, Ted Weems, Tony Pastor, Henry Busse, Ben Bernie, Gene Kruppa and Bob Charles.”¹⁴²

All of the bands mentioned were white, producing music for a white generation that consciously excluded African-Americans. This aspect of racial divide would remain to be a major problem for all resorts and amusement parks until legally challenged in the 1960’s. Music alone would not save Cedar Point. It needed all of the small business concessionaires to fully contribute. These initiatives would include the introduction of smaller less expensive rides and sideshows to the Amusement Circle such as *The Flying Skooter* in 1934 run by Joseph and Florence Santi. In 1941 Secondo Berardi introduced *The Octopus*. His son, Albert Berardi, in partnership with Howard Berni, the son of the owners of the *Skeet Ball* arcade, introduced a cheap, ten-cent potato chip food outlet and following the intervention of Mrs Berardi, who improved the quality of the product it became a hugely successful resort food outlet.

Although this was still a time of hardship for many people, French fries were not the zenith of Cedar Point’s culinary endeavour. Cedar Point still provided the elite luxuries that were expected of a premium resort. In reviewing the menu of the *Green and Silver Grill* for Monday 29 June 1936 “Broiled Baby Lobster with Melted Butter” was available at \$1.50 and “Porterhouse Steak Charcoal

¹⁴² David W. DeMali Francis and Diane DeMali Francis, *Images of America Cedar Point* (Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2004), p. 83.

Broiled, Parsley Butter Sauce” at \$2.00. These prices are equivalent, at today’s prices, to \$27 and \$34 respectively.

World War II was paradoxically a time of regeneration and challenge within the Cedar Point resort. The record levels of unemployed men in the country were reduced and the services and the armaments factories now employed them. This naturally resulted in many men being posted overseas and unable to visit the park. There were also severe material shortages that affected the park’s limited maintenance programmes even down to the quality of paper used in Cedar Point’s advertising. During the war Cedar Point differed significantly to Olympic Park, as wartime working mothers had no qualms about a Sunday afternoon visit to Olympic but appeared to be reluctant to take a longer family holiday break to Cedar Point whilst partners were fighting abroad. Access to Cedar Point also became problematic with the 1942 decommissioning of the *Goodtime* ferry. This was the first time since 1907 that there was to be no ferry service from Cleveland to Cedar Point. The park had declined to such a point that concessionaires darkly joked, “the buildings were held together by nothing more than layers of old paint.”¹⁴³ Stories of outbreaks of cholera within the resort hardly encouraged visitors to this now deteriorating resort.

In the early 1950’s the running of the park but not its ownership was awarded to Dan Schneider who, with Sam Gerstner, attempted to revitalize an

¹⁴³ David W. DeMali Francis and Diane DeMali Francis, *Images of America Cedar Point* (Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2004), p. 96.

ailing Cedar Point. The old steam ferry *G. A. Boeckling* was retired to be replaced, unsurprisingly, by the *G. A. Boeckling II*, a steel sixty five-foot long modern vessel. A new *Kiddieland* was added to the Amusement Circle to attempt to lure the new baby boomer generation to the park. *Ripley's Believe It Or Not Odditorium* opened and closed within just a few seasons, and old rides were given the traditional Cedar Point's rejuvenation solution of a new site, signage and a fresh coat of paint. By 1955 the concessionaires as well as the park were once again making money yet apocryphally this was the year of the launch of Disneyland, in an old orange grove in California, a place where fantasy had a strong foothold thanks to the adjacent movie business.

In the following year George Roose, a Toledo based bond dealer, tried to buy Cedar Point as a residential development opportunity but was stopped by the Ohio State legislature under the governorship of Frank Lauche following protests by employees and residents of Sandusky and beyond. The State wanted it preserved as a recreational facility and threatened to turn the site into a state park if it was to be sold for any other purpose than for the enjoyment of visitors. This follows the same pattern as Olympic Park where the increase in real estate values were seen to be outstripping the possible profits from running an under resourced resort and amusement park.

The only viable option was for an enterprise to buy the resort, invest millions of dollars and to try to succeed in this renaissance period of outdoor entertainment in the United States. For this purpose Roose needed a partner, whom

he found in banker Emile Legros and together they purchased the park for 316,000 dollars, a modest increase of 60,000 dollars on the 256,000 dollars paid in 1897 for the same site some seventy years earlier. This financial data underpins the fact that owning amusement parks and resorts was ultimately not a way of getting rich quickly.

However they were quick to start further investment in Cedar Point with another sixteen million dollars allotted to its rejuvenation calling it the “Ohio Disneyland.”¹⁴⁴ In 1959 they further proclaimed, “We run Cedar Point like General Motors.”¹⁴⁵ The introduction of Disneyland was a disruptive game changer for the industry. Disneyland was aggressively marketed across all media locally and nationally to the American public. It became an iconic place to visit, safe, secure, family friendly, clean and with excellent customer service. It’s actual visitor numbers were, however, dwarfed by those of Coney Island in its hay day. The stock Cedar Point response, in line with the interchangeability aspect of the parks, was to produce its own themed areas to the park with the construction of *Frontiertown* and the *Frontier Trail*, two “Old West” inspired parts of the park, in the late 1960’s. These failed dismally with the visitors and paled in comparison to Disney’s offerings. John Hildebrandt observed,

¹⁴⁴ Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p. 82.

¹⁴⁵ Karen Jones and John Wills, *The Invention Of The Park: Recreational Landscapes From The garden Of Eden To Disney's Magic Kingdom* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), pp. 112-113.

“Physically, Cedar Point resembles an old fashioned amusement park more than its modern relatives, the theme parks. Given its long history and the physical limits dictated by its unique geography, the orderly universe of a theme park was never a realistic possibility.”¹⁴⁶

At this point the management retrenched and reverted to its core strengths of a resort with an amusement park. It did not have the fantasy legacy, personalities, geography or currency to compete with a Disneyland type offering. It therefore concentrated on its core strengths of a comfortable place to stay and play.

One difficult and outstanding issue that it could not avoid along with all other amusement parks was that of the desegregation of the resort and amusement park. In 1961, The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, took the park to court to challenge its non-admittance of African Americans to the resort and hotel. David Nasaw quotes John Hildebrandt, the then Marketing Director of Cedar Point, as saying,

“Many traditional patrons of the country’s amusement parks did not feel comfortable sharing their park experiences with minorities.”¹⁴⁷

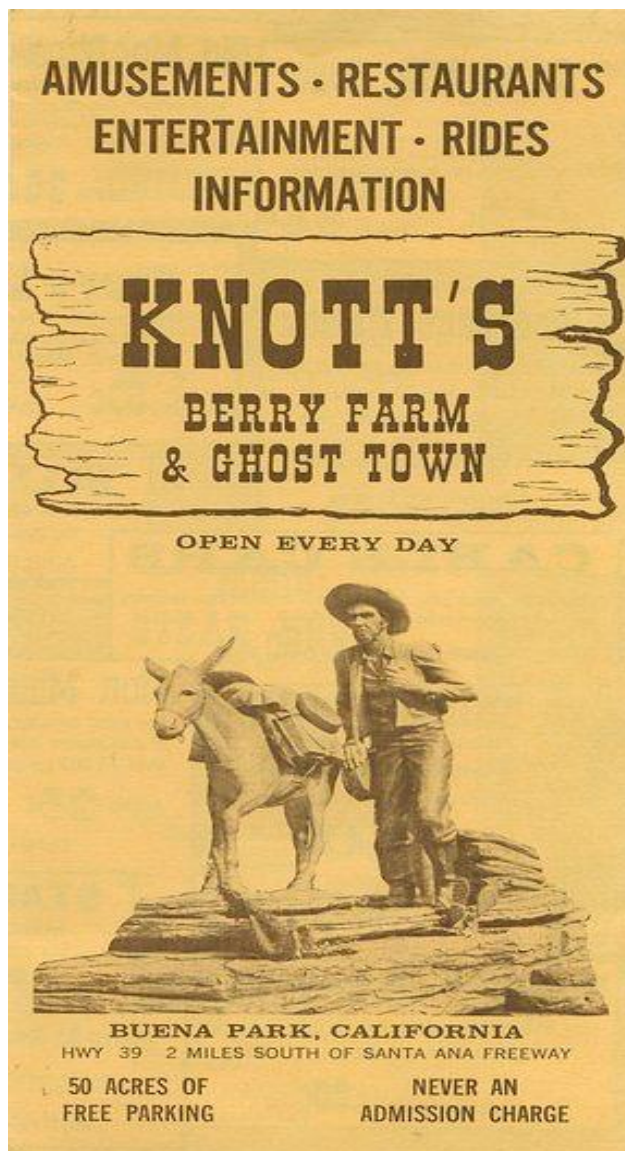
¹⁴⁶ Hugo John Hildebrandt, 'Cedar Park: A Park in Progress', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 15 (1981), pp. 87-106.

¹⁴⁷ David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 254.

A close examination of the photographs in the archives of Cedar Point however show no real evidence of any influx of African-Americans to the park following this court ruling and Hildebrandt's fears of a reduction in traditional visitors appear unfounded. As visitor numbers grew from 1.5 million in 1961 increased to 2.6 million visitors by 1967. In 1959 the park posted profits of \$1.3 million and a decade later this figure had risen to \$18.0 million. This was certainly a period of Renaissance for Cedar Point and for the few remaining amusement parks in general.

Over the period of the 20th century, North America's amusement parks were subjected to many of the same market conditions, which included an initial boom period, a deep long term economic recession, the huge loss of earning because of prohibition, continued and increasing competition for leisure time, high levels of required reinvestment, the apparent lack of ambitious owners who understood the amusement park's place within popular culture and the changing nature of their visitors. The overarching outdoor entertainment industry dynamics may have been the same for both parks, yet their distinct locations dictated that they had very differing local and national solutions to their challenges.

Section 7: Knotts Berry Farm



“We figure if something interests us it will most probably interest and amuse others.”¹⁴⁸

Walter Knott

Knotts Berry Farm is both a milestone and an anomaly in the growth of the American amusement park industry. It gives this dissertation an opportunity to look back at the halcyon days of the amusement park industry from the viewpoint of a period of great austerity and economic decline within the country’s history.

¹⁴⁸ Christopher Merritt and J. Eric Lynxwiler, *Knott's Preserved: From Boysenberry to Theme Park, the History of Knotts Berry Farm* (Santa Monica, California: Angel City Press, 2015), p. 29.

Yet, seemingly against all of the odds, a simple roadside berry farm and chicken dinner restaurant became a top ten American visitor attraction that continues to thrive in today's renaissance period, the theme park era.

The most appropriate place to start to review this milestone amusement enterprise is to analyse the demographic context of its location in Orange County California. There are several unifying factors in the demographic background to Knotts Berry Farm. Foremost it was in an area of enormous population growth and the enterprise was in close proximity to these population centres.

Population Centres within 100 Miles of Buena Park: Knotts Berry Farm.

Anaheim	5 miles
Santa Ana	11
Long Beach	13
Los Angeles	19
Glendale	24
Riverside	35
San Diego	93

The absolute population growth of California was phenomenal. Between 1930 and 1950 the United States Census estimated that the population of California almost doubled from 5.7 million in 1930 to 10.6 million in 1950, an increase of 4.9 million and a growth of eighty six percent. The subsequent outstanding point is that the population repeated this almost doubling performance once again between 1950 and 1970, growing from the 10.6 million

levels to 19.6 million, an increase of 9.0 million and another eighty five percent growth. It was a region of dynamic population growth propelled by the new federal enterprises, aerospace industries, military equipment manufacturers and power generation. This was white-collar high tech employment and the young affluent white population sector was the predominant population cohort and one looking to be amused.

Absolute Population Growth 1910 -1970: United States Census Data

Year	Anaheim	Santa Ana	Long Beach	Los Angeles	Glendale	Riverside	San Diego
1970	166,701	156,601	358,633	2,816,061	132,752	140,089	696,769
1960	104,184	100,350	344,168	2,479,015	119,442	84,332	573,224
1950	14,556	45,533	250,767	1,970,358	95,702	46,764	334,387
1940	11,031	31,921	164,271	1,504,277	82,582	34,696	203,341
1930	10,995	30,322	142,032	1,238,048	62,736	29,696	147,995
1920	5,256	15,485	55,593	576,673	13,356	19,341	74,683
1910	2,628	8,429	17,809	319,198	2,746	15,212	39,578

On a much smaller base level than the total state figures, Santa Ana, the closest town to Buena Park after Anaheim, tripled its population between 1950 and 1970. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century Los Angeles became the fastest growing conurbation in the United States and is the only population centre where the white population sector was below the national average for the country. Fuelled by the armed services, especially the navy San Diego doubled its population base following the end of World War II.

Percentage of Californian Population Designated White: Source United States Census Data

	Anaheim	Glendale	Long Beach	Los Angeles	Riverside	San Diego	Santa Ana
1970	98.1	98.3	91.8	77.2	93.1	88.9	93.0
1960	99.3	99.5	95.7	83.2	94.7	92.2	97.3
1950	99.1	99.7	97.4	89.3	95.1	94.5	98.8
1940	99.5	99.3	99.0	93.5	94.6	96.9	99.3
1930	99.1	99.2	99.2	94.6	96.2	96.8	99.1
1920	95.2	98.5	98.0	94.8	90.2	97.2	99.0
1910	98.5	98.5	98.6	95.6	88.8	97.2	99.4

The central factors to recognise from the above chart are not only the predominance of the white designated sector of the census data but also its constancy throughout the twentieth century. This was a very traditional, above average salaried, white region. Some had family ancestors that had made the perilous journey by covered wagon from the east and these pioneers had acquired almost mythical standing amongst the new baby boomer families. This was certainly true of Walter and Cordelia Knott.

Quite how significant this white bias in the population profile is can be clearly seen in the national figures for racial splits in the United States of America compared to California.

Percentage of Total United States Population Designated White, Black and Other: United States Census Data

Year	White	Black	Other
1970	87.7	11.1	1.2
1960	88.6	10.5	0.9
1950	89.5	10.0	0.5
1940	89.8	9.8	0.4
1930	89.8	9.7	0.5
1920	89.7	9.9	0.4
1910	88.9	10.7	0.4

Referring back to the Olympic Park case history the research there highlighted a crucial linkage between the suburban spread of African-Americans into the direct catchment area of the park and Olympic Park’s inability to meet the amusement needs of this demographic cohort leading to its ultimate closure. This was never an issue with which Knotts Berry had to contend, as the development around Buena Park was and continued to be predominantly white, affluent, middle-class and full of children, the archetypal 1950’s baby boomer area. One of the key findings in the interpretation of the population statistics is how consistent the figures have been over time and how predominantly white are California and its attractions. This is readily seen in the following chart with only Los Angeles having a lower than the national average proportion of white population.

Index of White Population over all other Demographic Groups in

Californian Centres of Population: United States Census Data

Year	1930	1950	1970
Anaheim	110	111	112
Santa Ana	110	110	106
Long Beach	111	109	105
Los Angeles	105	100	88
Glendale	110	113	113
Riverside	107	106	106
San Diego	107	106	101

The population profiles of California, in general and the main population centres close to Knotts Berry Farm, in particular, were ideally suited to the siting of an American amusement park. The prevalent level of racial discrimination was an aspect of American amusement parks that had for long excluded and derided the African-American. This was a population factor not lost on Walt Disney in 1955 in his siting in Anaheim of Disneyland, just five miles away.

The history of Knotts Berry Farm in many ways mirrors the enterprise and endeavour of many of the western bound migrants of the twentieth century. The American West was still a region where there was the opportunity and space for a family to work hard and create a thriving business. This was an opportunity not lost on Walter Knott whose grandmother had made the trip to the West by covered wagon and in his own estimation was a true “Madonna of the Prairie” as depicted

by William Koerner's iconic 1922 painting. This painting heralded the beginning of a period of heightened western romanticism, a trope into which the Knott family was going to tap deeply in its berry selling enterprise. At this juncture the question is just how did a roadside berry farm become a thriving amusement park business that defied the general national trend of the time with the closure and dereliction of many amusement parks?

The answer is that it did not start life as an amusement park as it was essentially an early western theme park that evolved into a thrill ride amusement park only in the second half of the twentieth century. In 1920, in partnership with his cousin, Jim Preston, Walter Knott leased thirty five acres of formerly alfalfa-farmed land and commenced to grow blackberries to sell direct to local residents. The first years were tough going and only improved with Walter Knott's introduction of a super berry initially called the Advanced Blackberry. This innovative venture grossed the Knott family \$2,000 and was as much based on Walter's self-promotion of the berry as any actual defined product advantage. According to Orange County historian Phil Brigandi, "Walter comes out of an era in America, and especially in Southern California, when boosterism was king."¹⁴⁹ Although reserved by nature Walter Knott was prepared to use every possible method to promote his produce. Walter was not the only member of the

¹⁴⁹ Christopher Merritt and J. Eric Lynxwiler, *Knott's Preserved: From Boysenberry to Theme Park, the History of Knotts Berry Farm* (Santa Monica, California: Angel City Press, 2015), p. 15.

family to understand the importance of inventive promotion and marketing of their products. Cordelia Knott devised new packaging made up of clean fresh wrapping paper held together with an elastic band rather than the competitor's packaging of old newspaper and string. To the consumer this was a clear product advantage. It was Cordelia who also added real value to the berry-farming venture with the 1928 idea of developing their rudimentary roadside stall into the more substantial Knotts Berry Place, as it was then known. The new enterprise was comprised of a new family home at one end, a middle section serving as a berry market and plant store and a further end section comprising of a five table seasonal Tea Room. The simple idea was that if you could get people to stop and rest they would eventually buy more jams, pies and preserves. Most of this summer only traffic was comprised of people travelling from Los Angeles to Huntington and Newport beaches who wanted to break their journeys.

The travellers consumed blackberry pie and berries and cream for 20 cents a portion and coffee for ten cents. Walter also found that the new tearoom and berry market was an ideal place for him to distribute his free booklet, "Berries and How To Grow Them." Walter, against the market trend, continued to purchase land at cheaper distress prices throughout the early years of the Great Depression, which gave him an economic advantage when land prices recovered. This price fluctuation is reflected in statistics provided by the United States Department of Agriculture:

Average Value of Land and Buildings per Acre for the United States.

Year	Price Per Acre	Period on Period Percentage Change
1920	\$68	
1925	\$54	-21%
1930	\$48	-11%
1935	\$31	-37%
1940	\$33	+6%
1945	\$41	+24%
1950	\$67	+63%

Source: United States Department of Agriculture. National Agricultural Statistics Service

The next major breakthrough was the introduction of the Boysenberry, developed and forgotten about by Rudolph Boysen, who was then Anaheim’s Supervisor of Parks. Walter Knott purchased six plants from Mr Boysen and they flourished, producing enormous fruits. According to local historians and writers Christopher Merritt and J. Eric Lynxwiler, “Sixty of the berries filled a pound basket while it took two to three times as many blackberries to do the same.”¹⁵⁰ Not only was Cordelia grateful for this enormous windfall for the Tea Room it also propelled the nursery business into becoming a successful national supplier.

¹⁵⁰ Christopher Merritt and J. Eric Lynxwiler, *Knott's Preserved: From Boysenberry to Theme Park, the History of Knotts Berry Farm* (Santa Monica, California: Angel City Press, 2015), p. 19.

Each acre of Boysenberries, approximately a hundred plants generated a massive \$1,760 per acre, almost double the average yield.

The next economic breakthrough was that in June 1934 Cordelia Knott produced her first chicken dinner, served up on her wedding china for sixty five cents a meal, to her first paying customers. On the first day of business there would be just eight of them. The culinary style was home cooking and traditional with mash potatoes, hot biscuits, vegetables, gravy, rhubarb sauce and, of course, berry pie and ice cream for dessert. By 1936 the average number of weekend customers grew to an unprecedented 620 per day and by Thanksgiving 1937 the figure had leapt to 1,774. Even with a huge restaurant expansion programme, the operation could just not cope with the demand. Another standalone Chicken Dinner Restaurant was built and sold 265,000 chicken meals in its first full year of operation. With this level of success came the challenge that some of the customers would have to wait up to three and a half hours for their meal and the Knott family had to devise inventive ways of diverting and amusing them under the Californian sun.

The spectre of racial segregation and discrimination continued to cast a long shadow under that same sun. In 1913 W. E. B. DuBois, the black sociologist, had written, “Out here in Southern California, there seem to be no limits on your opportunities and your possibilities.”¹⁵¹ This generous enthusiasm is countered in

¹⁵¹ Erin Aubry Kaplan, *Black Talk, Blue Thoughts and Walking the Colour Line. Dispatches From a Black Journalist* ([n.p]: Northeastern University Press, 2011), p. 182.

a reading of the 1949 “The Negro Motorist Green Book” found in the Henry Ford Collection where there is no mention of Knotts Berry Place accepting non-white customers to their tables. Again extensive pictorial research of Knotts Berry Farm displays a marked absence of black or brown faces enjoying the facilities and amusements. This did not make Knotts Berry Place different from the rest of the restaurant facilities in the state. At this point only one hotel in San Francisco admitted non-white customers. It just meant that the venue reflected the generally held and normative segregationist views of the population. Referring back to the demographic section in this dissertation on the nature of Southern California’s population profile it is an unsurprising finding which would not begin to change until the implementation of Lyndon B. Johnson’s Civil Rights Bill in 1964.

Whilst waiting for their table reservation to be announced over the loudspeaker system the customers needed to be distracted. It was at this point that, according to Mark Mitchell and Gregory Turner, the Knott family got into the ‘Agri-tainment’¹⁵² business. Initially there came a couple of antique music boxes in the waiting room followed by a volcanic rock garden planted with ferns and lit by coloured lights with a waterfall powered by a circulation pump from a disused tractor. Knott recreated George Washington’s fireplace and then a lake and garden on an old alkali bed which had previously be used as a garbage dump. In 1939 he built the famous volcano, from rock gathered from Pisgah Mountain

¹⁵² Mark Mitchell and Gregory Turner, 'Agri-tainment: A new crop for Farmers', *Journal of Food Products Marketing*, 16 (2010).

in the Mojave Desert. At this point the Knott family were inundated with financial offers to expand the enterprise into a chain of restaurants and venues but Walter Knott resisted, wanting to retain the independence of the enterprise and to build further on the western romantic tableaux that he had already started.

Knotts Berry Farm was yet another amusement park enterprise inspired by an exposition. In 1935 Walter Knott had visited the California Pacific International Exposition in San Diego where he viewed a recreation of a gold prospectors town, *Gold Gulch*. For Walter Knott it was a personal turning point and proved to be his inspiration for recreating his own western ghost town in Buena Park California. It confirmed his personal obsession with a romanticised western pioneer past and would also amuse and entertain the hungry crowd.

He began by investigating the area around Buena Park, going into the desert to salvage wagons, oxcarts, saddlers, miners' supplies and even giant logging cartwheels. He wanted to exhibit these artifacts in a single structure, a cyclorama and as with Thompson and Dundy's *A Trip to the Moon*, to create an immersive experience. In Jerome Junction near to Prescott Arizona he acquired the remains of the Junction Hotel. It still retained its glass swing doors and was renamed the Gold Trails Hotel and given a construction date of 1868, the year of his grandmothers trek westwards. This proved to be the start of the Knotts Berry ghost town proper and in Walter Knotts words was, "the most fool thing I've ever done." During the autumn of 1940 through to the summer of 1941 the town took shape with iconic western buildings housing a pack mule outfitters, a functioning

newspaper office, the *Ghost Town News*, a sheriff's office, *Hop Wing Lee's Chinese Laundry* and a jailhouse occupied by a horse thief known as Sad-Eye Joe, who became Knotts Berry's first themed caricature creation. The town was finished by the end of 1941 and included the *Silver Dollar Saloon*, which sold boysenberry punch and the town also featured, bizarrely, a brothel and a windmill. It was peopled by wooden characters and decorated with western art by Paul Swartz. It was the idealised creation of one man's view of the Old West. There was nothing authentic about it yet it connected with the white middle class crowds waiting for their meals and became an even stronger reason to visit the farm. At this point the investment level had been a modest twelve thousand dollars yet was never seen as a reason to visit the farm it was simply a distraction. Walter Knott had no intention of charging customers to view his own private obsession that could be fairly compared to Henry Ford's Greenfield Village in Dearborn Michigan.

The centrepiece of the ghost town, the cyclorama, was finally opened in February 1942 and was completed by Paul von Klieben, an Austrian born émigré who continued to promote the mythology of the Old West from a European viewpoint. As much as the town was a synthesis of ephemera collected from around the south west of the United States so were its creative masterminds with both Swartz and Klieben bringing their own stereotypical representations of the Old West to life in this simulacra. In the view of English cultural observers and historians Karen Jones and John Wills,

“Americans visiting Knotts Berry Farm amusement park in California from the 1920s could relate to the ‘authentic’ Wild West gun-fights and stories staged for their benefit. The amusement played to popular culture...Unrestrained fancy marked the amusement park experience,”¹⁵³

Whilst this dissertation would challenge this starting date and whether the farm was ever really an amusement park at this time the reference remains valid in that the farm created for visitors a believable palimpsest version of the mythology of the Old West.

The start of the United States involvement in the Second World War collided with the finishing of the first phase of the themed ghost town. The introduction of the Food Rationing Programme and the recruiting of men into the armed services initially adversely affected the business yet it continued to grow. More attractions were added to the town including the *Post Office*, the *Bird Cage Theatre* and the *Wells Fargo* building, the *Bottle House* and the *Music Hall*, which housed the 1870 painting *Night Watch*, by Charles Christian Nahl. Knott provided his own personal view of a bygone era and one that his customers appear to have hugely enjoyed.

Throughout the ghost town there were not only the representations of Chinese, Mexicans, Native Americans and the Caucasian settlers there was also

¹⁵³ Karen Jones and John Wills, *The Invention Of The Park: Recreational Landscapes From The garden Of Eden To Disney's Magic Kingdom* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), p. 99.

the opportunity to be photographed with them and to dress in their stylised costumes. At this time there was no resistance to the image of an Italian immigrant visitor from Los Angeles wearing a full Native American headdress in a western saloon. Cultural appropriation was not a social issue at this time. In the Calico Saloon Jo-An Burdick, a six foot tall, white Caucasian young woman can-can dancer would often adopt Native American dress in her barroom entertainment. Tropes were mixed and while the nation was currently fighting colloquially “Japs” “Huns” and “Nips” in Europe and the Pacific the portrayed level of unconscious cultural racism in Knotts Berry Farm was totally acceptable to the visitor and was indeed normative behaviour. This acceptance was further supported at this time by the racially insensitive portrayals of different ethnic groups by other media including cinema, television, newspapers and magazines.

Following the end of the Second World War the Western influenced theme park continued to grow with the addition of the *Wagon Camp* entertainment venue. Dave Bourne, one of the musicians of the Wagonmasters, recalls, “It gave me a chill every now and then it all felt so real.” As with many amusement parks the Knotts Berry main attractions were run not by the park itself but by concessionaires who paid the park a fee or commission to operate. This business model is seen all the way back to the halcyon days of Coney with Tilyou splitting the profits with Thompson and Dundy. Bill Higdon ran a stagecoach concession at the farm starting in 1949 with two horses and a covered wagon by 1954 he had thirty horses, a ticket office, four stagecoaches and a wagon that sprinkled water

onto the track to keep down the dust levels. It was an environment where innovation, creativity and sheer commercial chutzpah were handsomely rewarded. Walter also shared a passion for steam railways with his soon to be competitor just nine miles away in Anaheim, Walt Disney. He even visited Walt Disney's house to see his miniature garden railway in operation. In 1952 Walter introduced the *Ghost Town* and *Calico Railway* to the public with a televised "Golden Spike Celebration" compered by a white male, Colonel Ted Davis, wearing full Native American regalia. In 1955 the Church of the Reflections positioned next to the lake held its first service. It had been rebuilt from the First Baptist Church of Downey and with the schoolhouse erected in 1952 from a schoolhouse from Mitchell County Kansas, the town was a full working ecosystem with schoolchildren, Congregationalists and visitors all mixing in this free admission environment. It was a theme park in the purest sense and though the accounts were still private the chicken dinner restaurant and the new steak house were most likely the main income earners. In 1955 this was about to change with the introduction of Disneyland just nine miles away.

Walt Disney had been one of the important guests at the Golden Spike Celebration and had known and admired the intentions of Walter Knott's dream. His problem was that he wanted a fully functioning theme park from day one not one that had grown up organically over thirty years. He also wanted to use the latest technology for the sole purposes of fun and education, something Walter Knott had eschewed. Disney was an admirer of the park and hired Harper Goff,

the art director, to study the layout and appeal of Knotts Berry Farm. But Disneyland, in the parlance of Knotts Berry Farm, spooked the Knott family into thinking that commercial doom was imminent. However they held their nerve and began a new phase of development with *Old Macdonald's Farm*, the *Indian Village*, and the *Haunted Shack* and most importantly the introduction of the first mechanical driven ride, Wendell Hurlbut's carousel at Knotts Berry Farm. After attending the opening day of Disneyland on 17 July 1955, Cordelia and Walter Knott returned to Knotts Berry Farm to discover that their car park was full and business was good. For the first full year of competition with Disneyland Knotts Berry Farm had its best year ever and the enterprise realised that the competition from Disneyland merely encouraged more visitors to the area. Knotts Berry Farm's advertising campaigns promoted it as the place to visit once the visitor had finished with their trip to Disneyland. Steve Knott recalls the relationship with Disneyland being, "We had a rapport-a good close respect."¹⁵⁴ The Knott family did not try to compete with Disneyland. Sad-Eye Joe was no Micky Mouse and the family lacked the desire for advanced technology rides but held true to the respected, wholesome family friendly values and an idealised view of the Old West. This was a clean, respectable theme park built around western non-secular mythology. Interestingly the writer Gary Kyriazi describes Knotts Berry Farm

¹⁵⁴ Christopher Merritt and J. Eric Lynxwiler, *Knott's Preserved: From Boysenberry to Theme Park, the History of Knotts Berry Farm* (Santa Monica, California: Angel City Press, 2015), p. 103.

neither as an amusement park or a theme park but as an “attraction park”¹⁵⁵ Walter Knott was a staunch Republican supporter, a friend of the film star John Wayne, an accepted ultra nationalist and a believer in the virtues of hard work and reward. Where possible Walter hired local people, taught their children in the schoolhouse and celebrated Christian beliefs with them in the *Church of Reflections*. He paid bonuses to the employees that he was not contractually obliged to do and held sway over a highly paternalistic enterprise. In 1954 Walter Knott wrote a letter to the employees that underpins his style of ownership and management style.

“After the family, it’s my people that I am proud of. Your friendliness and your loyalty make me immensely proud. To me your friendly smiles are worth a lot.”¹⁵⁶

Following the launch of Disneyland in 1955 the enterprise and especially the younger family members, began to acknowledge that to continue to succeed it had to develop more elaborate mechanical rides. It started with the introduction of Hurlbut’s gentle carousel concession but soon ramped up with his second concession, the *Calico Mine* ride, which opened in November 1960. At this point the di was cast for the future development of the park. It would become over the next decades a fully- fledged mechanical amusement park. Knotts Berry Farm was enclosed in 1968, following an incident with some itinerant hippies and a member

¹⁵⁵ Gary Kyriazi, *The Great American Amusement Parks A Pictorial History* (New Jersey: Castle Books, 1976), p. 202.

¹⁵⁶ Christopher Merritt and J. Eric Lynxwiler, *Knott's Preserved: From Boysenberry to Theme Park, the History of Knotts Berry Farm* (Santa Monica, California: Angel City Press, 2015), p. 111.

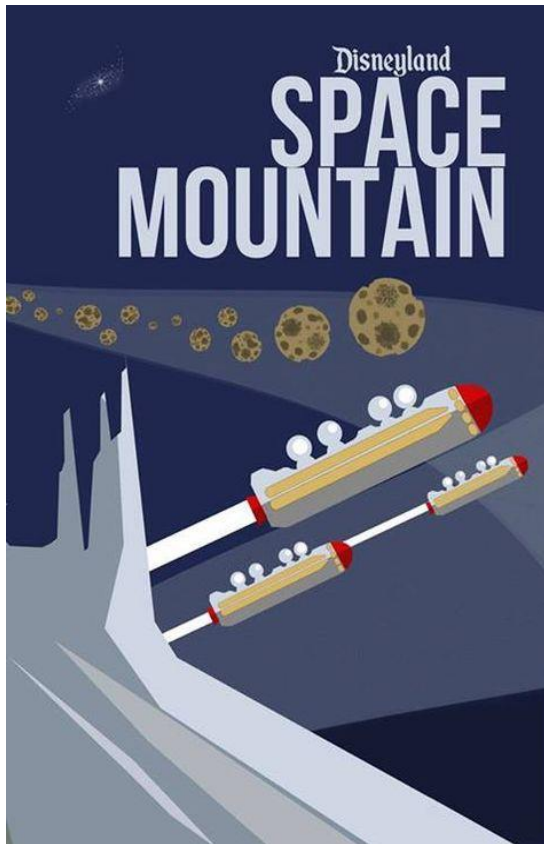
of staff and became a paying admission venue with an entry price of a single dollar. In 1997 it would become coincidentally, part of the Cedar Fair Company, the owners of Cedar Point who still relished the idea of running the parks like General Motors.

Knotts Berry Farm was certainly an anomaly within the amusement park industry. As with many examples of public outdoor entertainment it flourished due to a combination of disparate factors. It's location was fortuitous with the increase of automobiles becoming key to its success. It was surprisingly one of the few parks that had a freeway, Highway 39, running through it. It did not develop from a traditional venue of entertainment and beer drinking but from the need to entertain a food queue breaking its journey to and from the beach. It started as a very early version of a theme park but in an organic and chaotic amusement park model. This was highly unusual. According to Judith A. Adams, "it was not created as the result of a conscious plan or clear vision."¹⁵⁷ It thrived in close competition with Disneyland with a much simpler amusement offering pertinaciously retaining the Old West mythology. However it was not against "piggy backing" its own advertising on the huge Disneyland marketing strategy and expenditure and positioning itself as a complementary destination. It challenged the country's industry trend of amusement parks becoming theme parks by reversing this trend and not introducing mechanical rides until the 1970's

¹⁵⁷ Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p. 125.

when Knotts Berry Farm became part of the renaissance of amusement parks. Also this huge new investment into an amusement park was not by the Knott family but by the Cedar Point Fair Company that brought economies of scale to the necessary investments required to establish a modern thrill ride park. It had indeed established itself and flourished during the 1930s Depression, countering a time when the amusement park industry contracted by seventy five percent and fell into desuetude. The high quality of its dining experience, overseen by Cordelia Knott and the appeal of a romanticised western experience were a highly successful recipe. Knotts Berry Farm was a clear alternative facet to the established amusement park industry standards yet continues to thrive up to this day. This dissertation has covered a narrative arc from the technologically driven chaotic whirling dervish mechanical rides of Coney Island through to the variants of Olympic Park and Cedar Point and the anachronism of a theme or attraction park, Knotts Berry Farm, which eventually became an amusement park. The final narrative destination is the calm, fully choreographed fun in Disneyland's *Space Mountain*. It is at this point that the dissertation assesses what was the social and cultural progress of the United States of America through the development of technology as displayed in its amusement parks over this period.

Section 8: *Space Mountain* Disneyland 1977



“I don’t want the public to see the world they live in while they’re in the Park (Disneyland). I want to feel they’re in another world.”¹⁵⁸

Walter Elias Disney

With the launch of Disneyland on 17 July 1955 it is evident that Walt Disney’s original theme park concept was quite clearly and quite consciously not an amusement park.

“This ‘theme park.’ As the new term popped up, was to contain only two rides (a carousel and a miniature train) which were close to a typical amusement park ride (no roller coaster, no Ferris wheel, no bumper cars or tunnel of love), there were to be no games of skill of chance, and,

¹⁵⁸ Derham Groves, 'Hong Kong Disneyland. Feng Shui Inside The Magic Kingdom', ed. by Mark I. West and Kathy Merlock Jackson (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2011), p. 139.

breaking an unwritten law of the industry, the park didn't even border on a large body of water."¹⁵⁹

This is not to assume that Walt Disney did not have technologically driven mechanical amusement park style rides in mind. He simply could not find the necessary technology to make some of them into a reality and one such ride was *Space Mountain*. The concept for this essentially roller coaster ride was developed by Herb Ryman and John Hench, both leading Disney imagineers in the early 1960's and was comprised of two separate roller coaster tracks inside a single enclosure. The rides were internally named Alpha and Omega with the Alpha track being just ten foot longer than the Omega at 3,196 foot long. The challenge was to ensure that the two "rocket cars" did not collide mid-ride. To achieve this the ride would need to have electronic sensors to regulate their trip through the cosmos. At the time of its conception, in the early 1960's, there was no such electronic sensor product available. The ride would remain a concept until the second half of the 1970's when the first early computers became commercially available. Walt Disney did not live to see this innovative ride introduced to Walt Disney Magic Kingdom in 1975 and then in Disneyland in 1977.

The *Space Mountain* ride is a simple concept. From material gathered from the Disney archives the narrator to the ride for those queuing stated, "Earth man has long dreamed of exploring the mysteries of the galaxy and the infinite wonders

¹⁵⁹ Gary Kyriazi, *The Great American Amusement Parks A Pictorial History* (New Jersey: Castle Books, 1976), p. 167.

of the universe beyond.”¹⁶⁰ There were over seventy years between Thompson and Dundy’s *A Trip to the Moon* (see page 37-40) and *Space Mountain* and by then man had actually stood upon the moon’s surface in 1969. However in basic scope and appeal the two rides were amazingly similar. The investment costs however were markedly different. In 1903, according to Judith A. Adams, the cost of building the cyclorama for *A Trip to the Moon* in Luna Park had been \$52,000 and it had garnered \$250,000 in ticket sales in just three seasons.¹⁶¹ At 1977 levels this would have equated to an investment of just under half a million dollars. The *Space Mountain* complex in 1977 cost \$18 million to build which was more than the cost of constructing the whole of Disneyland in 1955.

The building housing the ride was more an inverted cone than a mountain and was reduced to 110 foot high and 200 foot in diameter from the original ride in Disney Magic Kingdom’s 180 foot high and 300 foot diameter, so that it would not overwhelm Disneyland’s smaller skyline and dominate the iconic fairy tale castle structure. This modern cyclorama needed flat spaces internally on which to project the images of the spiralling fantasy cosmos. The building was therefore turned inside out with all of its utilities and structural beams on the outside of the building leaving a blank flat surface internally. Contextually in the same year, the Pompidou Centre was built in a suburb of Paris designed by Richard Rogers and

¹⁶⁰ Jim Hill, 'Space Mountain Has A Story' <www.jimhillmedia.com> [accessed 7 July 2019]

¹⁶¹ Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p. 49.

Renzo Piano again with all of the pipework and utilities on the outside allowing clean, clear spaces to exhibit the Centre's celebrated works of art.

Walt Disney was known to dislike the way a rollercoaster dominated an amusement park and the noise of its screaming riders. He got around this problem by enclosing the ride into the mountain and creating thereby a "dark ride" which gave the illusion of speed and danger. John Hench reflects,

"We offer adventures in which you survive a personal challenge. We let your survival instincts triumph over adversity. A trip to Disneyland is an excuse in reassurance about oneself and one's ability to maybe even handle the real challenges of life."¹⁶²

The irony is that *Space Mountain* is one of the slowest roller coasters ever constructed, barely breaking twenty eight miles per hour and only just beating the *Barnstormer* ride's twenty five miles per hour, a ride designed specifically for younger children.

In *Space Mountain's* core concept Walt Disney contrived to take the amusement park's central tenet of the visitor becoming a willing participant in the spectacle and hiding them away inside a sealed ecosphere. With his use of delicate electronic audio animatronics throughout Disneyland there was a, look but do not touch sterility to the experience for the visitor. The amusement park experience was visceral and imbued the visitor with agency and immersion, touch was vital

¹⁶² Randy Bright, *Disneyland, Inside Story* (New York: Abrams, 1987), p. 237.

to the experience. For Disneyland this febrile hands-on amusement park experience was anathema, it needed the visitor to behave at a certain speed in a proscribed way, a much more passive experience than the frenetic, chaotic milieu of a traditional amusement park.

In Disneyland the ride ended in a post ride area called “*Home of Future Living*,” an RCA sponsored area. Here the riders could see themselves on RCA televisions and view RCA’s communication satellites. This was a business contrivance that Walt Disney had learnt working with the country’s leading manufacturing conglomerates in city-based expositions in the 1930’s and 1940’s.

Space Mountain is one of the few rides that feature in all five of the Disney theme parks around the world. In Disneyland it is the oldest extant ride yet still draws the biggest queues. In many ways it underwrites the beliefs of Thompson and Dundy that an exciting ride that takes visitors away from their known and unsurprising daily environments and places them in an alien ecosphere would attract and entertain the paying visitor. It was obviously a business stratagem not lost on Walt Disney with his heavily commercial theme park concept. Life had changed massively over the seventy years separating these two space travel orientated rides yet the rides remained essentially the same. That which touched the zeitgeist of the 1900’s population remained the same even after Neil Armstrong’s momentous step onto the moon’s surface. Space and its conquest were an on-going attraction to a nation of adventurous migrants who had already conquered and tamed a whole country. Space, speed and air travel were a natural

direction and distraction for this dynamic population who sought progress through technology. *A Trip to the Moon* cyclorama connected with the visitors so soon after arriving from a death-defying migration across the Atlantic. Having survived such a journey and with the frontier officially closed, according to Frederick Jackson Turner, the moon appeared to be a viable target to these adventurous men and women.

In the seventy-year narrative arc of this dissertation amusement parks had established themselves throughout the length and breadth of the United States. They had boomed and bust owing to various economic and social trends yet at their core their visitor appeal remained constant. This attractiveness was the consumer desire to be scared but with security, to witness outlandish objects and characters but from a safe distance, to discard social mores even for just a short while and to be part of a social whole, a feeling that was missing in everyday life. Walt Disney supposedly hated the roustabout atmosphere of the amusement park yet was happy to take its central ideas and repackage them. T. S. Eliot is quoted as saying that “immature poets imitate and mature poets steal.”¹⁶³ In this field of public entertainments the early amusement parks imitated the grand Midways of the city-based expositions particularly The World’s Columbian Exposition. The theme parks as mature businesses simply stole what was best in the amusement parks, repackaged it, rebranded it and got it sponsored. The entities would never

¹⁶³ T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood. Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), p. 105.

be the same yet the degrees of difference between them is less than many academics believe.

Section 9: Overview



“He who can look upon
A merry-go-round without longing
to ride the wooden horse once
more before he dies, for all the
maturity of his middle age, can
hardly be a human being.”¹⁶⁴

In many ways the American amusement park industry appears to be ineradicable. The eighty-four year narrative arc covered by this dissertation is bookended by two iconic rides, *A Trip to the Moon* and *Space Mountain*. These were both mechanical amusement rides, very similar in their thematic intentions but worlds apart in their delivery. The former was a manually operated cyclorama. The latter was a computer operated branded roller coaster transformed into a dark ride. These iconic rides were technologically divergent and they reflected the extent of how much the nation had changed over the span of this dissertation.

The twentieth century in the United States was a period of immense transformation. It saw a population explosion, fuelled mainly by immigration, which grew from seventy-six million to nearly two hundred and sixteen million

¹⁶⁴ Richard Le Gallienne, 'Human Need of Coney Island', *Cosmopolitan* 39, July 1905, pp. 239-46.

by the late 1970's, a near three-fold increase. The country was now an urban based, industrial society devolved from a community based rural family model. The country had a gross domestic product that had grown from \$1.1 trillion in 1929, the first official estimated figure, to \$5.6 trillion in 1977. Automobile ownership across the country grew from an estimated 8,000 in 1900 to a staggering 106,705,934 in 1975. Home ownership was up and poverty levels were down.

In 1893 the United States proclaimed its return to strength and power after a bloody civil war and reconstruction in the form of the World's Columbian Exposition. It was the bravura and hubris of a country displaying to the rest of the world that it could use cutting-edge mechanical technology to simply amuse its citizens. This event is generally accepted as the launch event for the country's amusement park industry that became a phenomenal success in the first half of the first quarter of the century only to radically contract by nearly three quarters by the mid-century. In the face of increasing competition from many leisure time providers it carved out a business niche based on speed risk and the newly affluent young adult.

In the final chapter of this dissertation its qualitative and quantitative findings are brought together for the first time. Some of the most challenging issues that faced all of the amusement parks are also highlighted in this last chapter. These ranged from the importance of location, the presence of institutional racism, the

effects of economic downturns and recovery to the importance of changing population profiles and the effects of increased competition.

Population and Location

From the research carried out for this dissertation amusement parks were seen to succeed and fail due to factors of population and location. Amusement parks needed visitors in great numbers to survive and being sited near to major conurbations was crucial to their success or failure. However, as the dissertation's research into Olympic Park displayed, being in a changing suburban residential area of a major city was not necessarily a business opportunity and eventually heralded the park's demise in 1965. A combination of not being able to serve a new market and the rise of land values combined to force the closure. Conversely Knotts Berry Farm's favourable loci in southern California and Cedar Point's remote lakeside location became positive benefits against the generally held academic view that closeness to urban areas was key to business success. Cedar Point was restricted for space by the infrastructure of the resort, mainly the hotels. Their business approach was to refresh the visitor experience by repurposing, rebranding and renaming existing rides. There was no single reason for success or failure in terms of location or access. For every example of success and longevity based on its location and closeness to a growing population base such as Coney Island there is an obverse example such as Olympic Park. Cleveland's Euclid Beach Park, on the shores of Lake Erie, failed whereas, Cedar Point, on the very same lake, succeeded and is still in operation today. These are clear counter

examples of how misleading well-held academic beliefs can be regarding the locations of the amusement park industry and how they can also be so erroneous. As academic observers used a conveniently condensed approach for their notions of the importance of location and population the fact is that detailed analysis of individual parks conducted for this dissertation does sometimes counter the accepted axioms.

Visitor Numbers and Investment

Levels of investment, allied to strong visitor numbers, also factored into the success or failure of the amusement parks of this period. The lifeblood of an amusement park is its absolute number of visitors and how many leisure dollars the park owner can prise from the visitor. To maximise this strategy the amusement park owners knew that the parks had to be reinvigorated and upgraded on a seasonal basis if they were to get repeat business. In the period from Disneyland's launch in 1955 through to *Space Mountain's* arrival in 1977, Disneyland admitted 150 million guests, an average of 7.5 million each year. Whilst these figures were spectacular, with Disneyland reaching its one millionth guest in just 3 months of its opening in September 1955, it still could not compare to the attendance figures for Coney Island's three amusement parks in the first decade of the twentieth century, even though the Coney Island attendances were founded on a much smaller population base.

This is an industry and a product that has experienced a full product lifecycle but still survives in a more corporate form today. The early parks were

monuments to the diversity of their appeal and the differing creative imaginations of their owners and conceivers. They shared a common goal of attempting to be financially viable enterprises and indeed there were vast sums of money to be made. There was a gold rush mentality to the early growth of amusement park investment across the country. There is also evidence that profits from business sectors such as transport, brewing and banking, made in the debased Gilded Age, were ploughed into these new forms of social entertainment. *A Trip to the Moon* cyclorama took £250,000 in ticket sales in its first three seasons in Coney Island based on an investment of just \$52,000. This level of return on investment attracted dubious investors such as John W. Gates, the infamous gambler and robber baron and financial backer of Thompson and Dundy and William H. Reynolds, the real estate speculator, who headed up the ill-fated Dreamland consortium. Many observers laid the blame for the decline in the fortunes of the industry squarely at the feet of the Great Depression of the 1930's. The evidence uncovered through the work of this dissertation has shown however that the industry was beginning to fail long before then. The period of economic depression in the 1930's merely acted as a coup de grace for much of an ailing amusement park industry. The Great Depression is a convenient misconceived milestone that many academic writers cling to in order to explain the decline of the industry. The ownership structures of enterprises such as Cedar Point and Knotts Berry Farm both continuously reinvested profits into their enterprises and were the ones to ultimately succeed and survive. Locations that had cheap initial

land values on the edge of cities ended up being swallowed up in suburban sprawls and were sites that were valued significantly more as residential or commercial reconstruction sites than amusement parks. The growth of the automobile industry allowed the potential amusement park visitor far greater choice every Sunday with a widening entertainment hinterland. The population's move west fuelled the growth of amusement parks beyond the Ohio River. Only through a strategy of reinvention and reinvestment was an amusement park able to succeed. Visitors, particularly the younger adults, wanted new experiences and this desire was met by the introduction of higher and faster rides with their allied thrills. All of this cost vast sums and led to a more corporate approach to amusement parks by the likes of the Six Flags and Cedar Parks organisations.

Racism, Gender and Exclusion

As with general daily life in the United States not all people were welcome to enjoy the benefits of a day or a week at an amusement park. Discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender or class were all issues that existed within and without the American amusement park industry. In all of the research for this dissertation it did not discover any major amusement park that went against the societal norms of racial segregation, exclusion and discrimination of the times, especially against African-Americans. This is particularly seen in the early twentieth century in Coney Island and Olympic Park with the "*African Dodger*" game of degrading and brutalising the African- American. This was a sideshow that it took the Supreme Court to close down. Other ethnic groups were

marginalised as in Knotts Berry Farm with its stereotyping of the Chinese immigrants with *Wing Lee's Chinese laundry*. Women fared little better, at Knotts Berry Farm, with not a single woman as one of the park's fourteen main characters. Women were portrayed as prostitutes and saloon girls and certainly never achieved agency in the early days of the *Ghost Town*. Yet, with very few exceptions, this was the generalised, normative thinking of the time and became part of the overall academic narrative of the amusement park.

A detailed research programme on the modern theme park model of public entertainment was beyond the remit of this dissertation. However, the issues of racial segregation were not solved with this new iteration of public amusement. Disneyland culturally and consciously excluded ethnic groups and they were made to appear out of place in a predominantly white, middle class amusement environment. The architect Paul Goldberger described the nostalgic, sanitized view of Main Street as,

“...a kind of universally true Main Street – it's better than the real Main Street of the turn of the century ever could be.”¹⁶⁵

The turn of the century was certainly not a positive period for the African-American. Main Street was an ersatz place where white Americans wanted to live, a fantasy place that bore no close reality to their daily, segregated lives. To ethnic minorities Disney's creation was a singular place of Christian beliefs and overt

¹⁶⁵ Paul Goldberger, 'Mickey Mouse Teaches The Architects', *New York Times Magazine*, 22 October 1972, p. 95.

retail commercialism. Minority groups saw Disneyland and the new theme parks as places of Christian sanctuary and refuge, places in which they could not share.

In Judith A. Adams observation,

“But just like Chicago’s White City in the previous century, the darkest aspect of Main Street is its enshrinement of Anglo-American imagery to the total exclusion of immigrant and ethnic infusions.”¹⁶⁶

Reverting to the very first quote in this dissertation the new American immigrants had to understand that to enjoy themselves and have fun was not a sin. It did, however, appear that having fun was to be a sin if experienced with the ruling protestant Christian elite.

Ownership and Innovation

The ownership structure of the parks is important because it underlaid their inherent racism and segregation. This was an industry created by white people for the enjoyment of white people. In the contentious area of gender discrimination the amusement parks were credited in democratising fun for women. However, as seen in the case history for Olympic Park, this was, at best, of a token nature. The only true exception to the academic axiom that white males ran this industry discovered by this dissertation was Cordelia Knott, who was a major creative partner in the growth and ultimate success of the Knotts Berry Farm enterprise. Again Judith A. Adams declares, “George Tilyou, Frederic Thompson and Elmer

¹⁶⁶ Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p. 98.

“Skip” Dundy, Walter Knott and Walt Disney created their own formulas for success.” She continues, “But each man added his own unique ingredients, which reflected the culture of his time and the desires of the paying public.”¹⁶⁷ Tilyou was renowned, if not infamous, for his signature rides promoting sensual, visceral experiences outside of everyday social mores. Thompson and Dundy created in Luna park a visual masterpiece that confused, disorientated and engaged the visitors, allowing themselves to be virtually transported to the moon and back. Walter Knott and his family created with the Ghost Town an homage to the Old West, very little of it based on verisimilitude but striking a common chord with its visitors.

The Introduction of Disneyland.

A repeated academic view is that the introduction of the modern theme park, particularly Disneyland, caused the ultimate decline of the American amusement park. Judith A. Adams believes that the introduction of the theme park transformed a “moribund” amusement park industry¹⁶⁸. This estimated decline from 2,000 amusement parks to less than 500 was however begun long before the introduction of Disneyland. It was not a cause of the numerical decline in amusement parks in a country that, over the same period of research conducted for this dissertation, displayed a huge population growth, increased individual

¹⁶⁷ Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p. 162.

¹⁶⁸ Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p. 165.

wealth, more global influence and much more free time in which to play. Judith A. Adams however observes that not everything was so positive within North American society.

“Individually, Americans have been faced with progressively worsening social and urban problems, a government lacking moral integrity, a chaotic and competitive working world and the severing of the family unit.”¹⁶⁹

In fact, as demonstrated in this dissertation, the modern theme park concept owed much more to the amusement parks than Walt Disney and some cultural observers were ever going to admit. Standards of dress, levels of behaviour, the quality of staff, the high levels of maintenance within the parks, mass promotion and advertising and the provision of a safe area in which to enjoy oneself were all elements of existing amusement parks. Olympic Park and Cedar Point were well-maintained, clean enterprises. Staff were well trained and standards of food and drink, as particularly identified in Cedar Point and Knotts Berry Farm, were high. Walt Disney appropriated established ideas and repackaged them as something innovative and fresh as, with his friend Walter Knott, he was not adverse to old style Californian boosterism.

Disneyland became a catalyst for change and the surviving amusement parks had to change, in the face of the threat of the theme park, in order to prosper.

¹⁶⁹ Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston, Mass: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p. 97.

The motif of the amusement park had always been the elephant. There is no doubt that with the launch of Disneyland held true to the old adage, that the mouse helped to nearly scare the amusement park elephant out of existence.

Other Media Competitors

The American amusement park's iconic cultural references and milieu featured prominently and were appropriated by many other competitive media. In many ways the amusement park industry became the muse for a range of other cultural platforms. In 1903 Thomas Edison filmed for the cinema the gruesome execution of Topsy the elephant by electrocution in Luna Park. Woody Allen set Alvy Singer's house in the film *Annie Hall* next to the Coney Island roller coaster. *Us*, the latest movie written and directed by Jordan Peele, ironically places a black family on holiday in a beach-front amusement park in Santa Cruz California in 1987. *Westworld* in 1973 and *Jurassic Park* in 1993 created their own unique takes on theme parks. In music everything from the barbershop crooning of Goodbye My Coney Island Friend, to the Velvet Underground's Coney Island Steeplechase, to the Beach Boys Amusement Park USA, filled the airwaves. Artists were drawn to the bright lights, sordidness and abandoned gaiety of the amusement park. Joseph Stella painted "Battle of Lights, Mardi Gras, Coney Island." Richard Marsh produced the graphic "George C. Tilyou's Steeplechase Park". Amusement parks have become the setting for a whole genre of young adult novels with titles like *The Dark Ride*, *Hot Dog Girl* and *The Summer of Cotton Candy*.

Amusement Parks Target Audiences

The American amusement park had been constructed on the premise of catering for the amusement needs of young people and adults. These were the workers with increased disposable incomes and more free time in which to spend it. As with the amusement parks themselves this dissertation has concentrated on these more affluent adult visitors. Children-only sections of the amusement parks were built and were highly successful. Most were called Kiddielands yet they were not the amusement park proper. The thrill and risk rides was designed solely for adults. Many Kiddielands were built in the 1960's and 1970's next to or in shopping malls and out of town retail centres. A shining example of this type of amusement park innovation for children was the Knotts Berry Farm's highly successful development of Camp Snoopy in the Mall of America in Minnesota. Some innovators however wanted a broader demographic canvas. Walt Disney declared, "You're dead if you only aim for kids. Adults are only kids grown up anyway."¹⁷⁰ This approach was reflected in its admission details and was backed up by an article written by Kevin Wallace who claimed that adult visitors to Disneyland outnumber children by a ratio of four to one with half of them being repeat guests.¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ Marc Lee, 'A Golden Age Of Animation Comes To Life', *Daily Telegraph*, 2009

¹⁷¹ Kevin Wallace, 'The Engineering of Ease', *New Yorker* 39, 7 september 1963, p. 106.

Case Histories and Academic Findings

The three case histories were extensively researched and constructed in this dissertation to convey the diversity of the American amusement parks. From their different inceptions, their on-going business strategies and their provision of entertainment and amusement to the American public they all differed from each other. Some were sylvan, others more urban. Many amusement parks were beside large bodies of water, others not. Disneyland is a key exception to this seemingly unwritten rule that a park needed to be sited beside water in order to be successful. Many owners concentrated on the visitor amenities such as at Cedar Point and only addressed the rides as a secondary issue. Some, such as Disneyland, initially eschewed the high-risk thrill rides. For others, like Cedar Point, they transformed and became the “roller coaster capital of the world.” The Knotts Berry Farm enterprise transmogrified from berry sellers in a period of economic depression to be the site of the first corkscrew roller coaster in the country and the instigators of Halloween as a major theme landmark in the season’s amusement park year, an innovation which was to be copied by all of its major amusement park competitors and other media platforms. The academic teleology of the detailed case histories was intended to identify the apparent similarities between the parks but it was also designed to research their significant differences. There is a tendency within the limited academic writings available to stereotype amusement parks into a convenient amorphous whole. It is easier to academically argue and compare large seamless enterprises rather than highly individualistic businesses each with their

own unique signatures. This is especially true of academic writers' attempts to define amusement parks and to compare them to the modern theme parks. This traditional academic approach was to the detriment of the observer and ultimately the reader.

One of the aims of this dissertation was to try to not lay the blame for drastic changes in the industry at the half open doors of inexactitude. For example, it is too simplistic to blame the economic problems of the industry on easy answers like The Great Depression as, the economic decay within the industry had set in long before 1929. Another example is to highlight that Walt Disney simply disliked amusement parks and therefore invented the theme park model. For all of his dislike of the dissonance of the amusement park industry Walt Disney adopted its more financially rewarding elements extraordinarily readily. Knotts Berry Farm's counter success to the amusement park industry's economic decline is evident as it prospered and grew during the distressing dust bowl era of American social history whilst its competitors failed and closed. It's the exceptions rather than the long held misconceptions that build true rigour into any analysis of this industry.

The United States of America during the near three generations period researched for this dissertation had changed materially beyond recognition. All aspects of the country's population, wealth, global political stance, cultural influences and social conditions had altered and often not always for the better. It is no wonder that an industry so adept in meeting the demands of ever-changing

visitor needs and desires should also have radically changed itself throughout this period. One example of this industry's flexibility is shown clearly in Coney Island's transformation from purely a place of enclosed amusement parks to what became known as the Nickel Empire. The newly built New York subway brought a new less affluent mass market to Coney Island but at a much cheaper price. Dale Samuelson observed, "A nickel bought you a hot dog, a milkshake or a spin on most of the rides."¹⁷²

As teenagers and young adults became an economically important section of the American population cohort the remaining amusement parks adopted a creative approach of faster, higher and scarier thrill rides. Much of the technology for the thrill rides came from other countries. Even in the genesis of Coney Island this approach was not unusual. The basic idea of Steeplechase had come from an inventor in Blackpool in England. The industry had become far more corporate with conglomerations like Six Flags and Cedar Parks producing interchangeable venues for outdoor amusement. The thrill of a park's individual diversity and unique style was lost under a welter of sponsorship and industrial partnerships.

In many ways this diluting of the amusement park's distinct character was heralded by the launch of Disneyland's theme park concept. As the family unit had found a new destination to sate its desire for outdoor amusement then the traditional amusement parks had to concentrate on new, younger, thrill- seeking

¹⁷² Dale Samuelson and Wendy Yegoians, 'The American Amusement Park', 2001, p. 32.

demographic targets. The theme park provided a fragmented and safe zone promoted on television and constructed and themed just like an evening's television viewing. There, in the comfort of a suburban home, the viewer could watch and switch between westerns, science fiction, comedy, animal adventures, car chases and historical programming. With its launch in 1955 Disneyland could provide the same consumer with an instantaneous choice in a theme park safe ecosphere. The guest could experience the same switching experience but now it was between Main Street, Adventureland, Frontierland, Fantasyland and Tomorrowland. They had, however, changed from active participators to passive spectators, swept along a set, preordained amusement route.

Even calling the visitors guests in Disneyland transposed them into a role where they were graciously admitted to someone else's environment and had to act and behave in a sensible, sedate and civilised manner. The loss was of the tactile, visceral experience as with a tumbling of bodies on Tilyou's *Human Roulette Wheel*, the *Tunnel of Love* or the cheap sexualised thrills of the *Insanitarium*, where the visitor was very much central to the overall amusement park experience. In many ways Tilyou's amusements were an early precursor of the reality programmes of today where the public were stars.

The amusement park as an entertainment concept lasted, adapted and developed into a viable and thriving amusement niche for itself. New York visitors still eat Nathan's hot dogs in Coney Island and in southern California they continue to ride *Space Mountain* in Disneyland and visit the Old West gunfight

re-enactments at Knotts Berry Farm. The world may very well have changed and the amusement park with it but there is still an untapped desire by many to be a little bit frightened, marginally disorientated and to throw off the everyday economic and social norms. Whilst these human desires continue to exist there will always be a need for just one more ride at the amusement park.

Word Count:

40,587 words without footnotes and endnotes. 43,756 words with footnotes and endnotes.

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vWtAKdISfCo>

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Olympic Park Irvington New Jersey

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJMUhJAQFBw>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2oNORFIYjIk>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xxsLsC-ahWk>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=faA7wnxNwNs>

Cedar Point Sandusky Ohio

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lJ7tKej2pFk>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zL7YHRWpKis>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aHsKn8h-R-4>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CG68fcNd2SA>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dna7glU_gcA

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5pQCV9ulzNI>

Knotts Berry Farm

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mfCveWl0Nwo>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GVwo61L98B8>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KNe28Aqhcek>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ec1Da6sZk9Q>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YkCukZzi73o>

The Ferris wheel

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wBr_htJEc4

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xmR9rr_r3uw

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=StPKfNXK3N0>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QvdZRNv-8CE>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3sIE2LZQIY>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8XZMPQWwuk>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5gTRuJqf7tY>

The Carousel

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m83vkbxS11Y>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0dR1zMR9vj0>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J544I0apcOI>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OoQFPrGmG44>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVfX4poDbYA>

The Roller Coaster

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2-7Y3n2rAs>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LqcgEaj2xJk>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cY8WLncXh7g>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mJy29NOwVfA>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NXTd6XcLP9>

Space Mountain

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fMlt8KSZUyk>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pth1Y8ij2l8>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ESr9UYeCXw>

Appendix 2: Pictorial References

Image 1 World Columbian Exposition



Image 3 Steeplechase Park Coney Island



Image 5 Trip to the Moon



Image 2 Ferris wheel



Image 4 Luna Park Coney Island



Image 6 George Tilyou

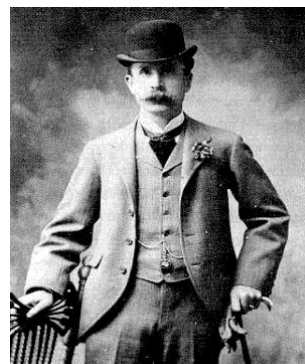


Image 7 Paul Boyton



Image 8 Thompson & Dundy



Image 9 Olympic Park



Image 10 Olympic Park



Image 13 Cedar Point



Image 14 Cedar Point



Image 16 George Boeckling



Image 17 Knotts Berry Farm



Image 18 Knotts Berry Farm



Image 19 Knotts Berry Advertising



Image 20 Steeplechase Park Advertising

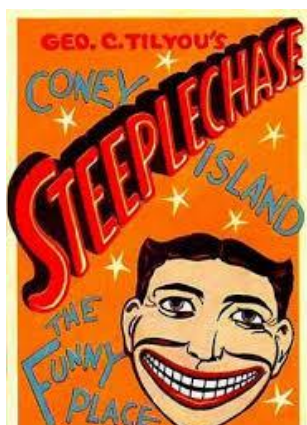


Image 21 Luna Park Advertising

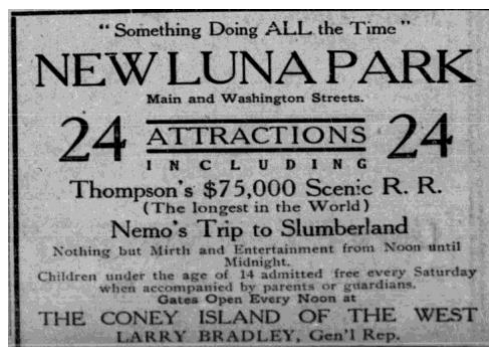


Image 22 Dreamland Advertising



Image 24 Disneyland Advertising



Image 26 Walter Knott

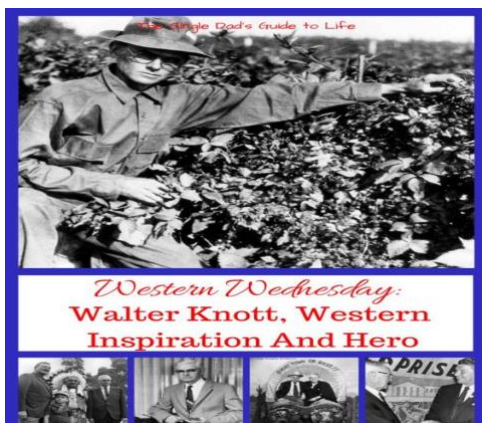


Image 23 Knotts Berry Farm Advertising

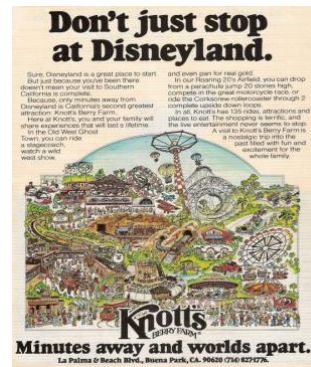


Image 25 Disneyland Advertising



Image 27 Knotts Berry Queue Card

