

# Giant Dipper celebrate century of thrills

By Geoffrey Dunn

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**ALL AGES** Riding the Dipper never gets old and it keeps us young. Charles Canfield and Geoff I

*The great roller coaster arose amid screams above the golden strand of the Santa Cruz Boardwalk—a tooth-loosener,*

*eyeball-popper, and one long shriek.*

*—Herb Caen, San Francisco Chronicle*

**E**arly morning at the Boardwalk is one of my favorite times. It is ever so calm and quiet, save for the squawking of seagulls circling over the waterfront. There is a subtle sense of anticipation as the day is about to unfold, and in early spring, there is still a bite in the air and a light mist sits over the bay. Sweet scents of cotton candy and saltwater taffy emanate from the colonnade as I'm preparing for the kinetic human energy that gathers and then reaches a crescendo each and every day along the promenade.



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It's a stroll that I've taken hundreds, if not more than a thousand, times over the years, ever since I was a kid on the Santa Cruz waterfront in the 1950s. There was a stretch of years when my cousins and I would walk it nearly every day. I never grow tired of the carnival ambience—that crazy midway

mix of sights and sounds and aromas and anticipation, and today, I confess, a little apprehension, too. I've been invited to ride the Boardwalk's iconic wooden roller coaster—the Giant Dipper—which on Friday, May 17, will be celebrating its 100th birthday.

Riding the Giant Dipper is a rite of passage for virtually every young kid who grows up in or around Santa Cruz. You need to be 50 inches tall to get on the ride—a little over four feet—which most kids reach between the third and fourth grade. I remember having to wait until the summer after fourth grade until I finally got my chance to ride it—with my parents, as I recall, on their wedding anniversary in August of 1964. I still remember the evening, proud, excited, and nervous, boarding one of the cars, sitting next to my dad with my mom behind us (she was actually 9 when the ride first opened in 1924)—and then, well, the magic of it all.

What I will never forget—it's been permanently embedded in my memory—was the absolutely mesmerizing panoramic view from the top of the first high climb, looking out over the City of Santa Cruz all the way to Bonny Doon and the ridges of the Santa Cruz mountains, out into the vast darkness of the Pacific Ocean beyond the bay, the coastal terrain stretching all

the way to Watsonville and Moss Landing, and the lights sparkling everywhere in the distance, Oz-like.

And then, whooooooosh!, in an instant, it all goes away. The world drops beneath you. I remember my mother screaming, a primal caterwaul of fear and who knows what, and you hang on for dear life.

What a ride!

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**DOWN UNDER** Boardwalk workers meet with Charles Canfield in the parts of the park no tourist ever sees. PHOTO: Wai-ling Quist

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## CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARDWALK

My companion for today's jaunt is none other than Charles L. Canfield, the former president and CEO of the Santa Cruz Seaside Company (the overseer of Boardwalk operations), who continues to serve as the SCSC's chairman of the board. For a couple of old salts who have spent big chunks of their lives on the Santa Cruz waterfront, we seem surprisingly excited (perhaps even a little anxious) by our morning itinerary.

One of the first things one notices about Canfield is that even though he's no longer in charge of the day-to-day at the Boardwalk, he seems to love every nook and cranny of the place. His smile takes on a youthful radiance as he talks about the joys and delights of being involved with one of the oldest remaining amusement parks on the Pacific Coast. I know how old he is (I'll let you do the math; he graduated from Santa Cruz High in 1957), but he shows no signs of slowing down. He clearly still loves it—passionately and intensely.

“Hey, it's a cool spot,” he says, with a sparkle in his eyes, an adolescent grin. “It's fun and it makes a lot of people happy.”

Canfield greets many of the Boardwalk employees we encounter with a nod or friendly hello. It feels genuine and unforced. “Charles' leadership style is to treat his employees like part of the family,” says Kris Reyes, the Santa Cruz

Seaside Company's director of external affairs and strategic development. "There is absolutely zero ego with Charles. Everything is about the Boardwalk and the employees and working to make the park better year after year."

When Canfield talks about the Boardwalk's accomplishments —and there have been many since the park celebrated its centennial in 2007, including being named the recipient of the Golden Ticket Award for the Best Seaside Amusement Park in the world—he often directs credit to his staff or uses the plural "we." "It's not about him and never has been," says Reyes. "It's about the team."

Charles Canfield's earliest memories of the Boardwalk are of coming to it with his family for Fourth of July fireworks celebrations in the late 1940s, when most of Santa Cruz would partake in the annual festivities, along with thousands of tourists from the sweltering inland valleys of California. We reminisce about the massive Independence Day crowds of our childhood and the mounting anticipation that always was in the air.

His most beloved spot (as was mine) was the old Fun House, an interior amusement center with a clown-face entrance that featured slick wooden slides, air blasts, distorted mirrors,

rotating barrels and a large spinning wheel called “the Platter,” which was Canfield’s personal favorite. “You’d get on in the middle and hold onto someone and suddenly you’d be flying through the air together,” he laughs. “It was a little dangerous.”

When I announce that the Giant Dipper—with its high-rising, red-and-white scaffold-like frame and cars that descend at speeds up to 50-plus miles-per-hour—is looking a little intimidating, or even imposing, to me this morning, he responds with an assuring grin. “We’ll be alright.”

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LANDMARK Did you know the Giant Dipper got its start downtown? PHOTO: Contributed

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## ROLLING THROUGH HISTORY

Roller coasters have long been an incredibly popular national

pastime, from coast to coast, deep into the American heartland. Thrill seekers to this day can't seem to get enough of those intestinal contractions and fear-infused sensations of being out of control.

Derived from "ice slides" that permeated Russia in the 18th century, and later, according to lore, by Russian soldiers sliding down mountains in France, the modern roller coaster gained popularity in the United States in the aftermath of the Civil War.

The roller coaster craze, counter to what has been generally portrayed, first hit Santa Cruz as early as 1885. It was located downtown, on what was known as the "Hodgdon lot," on the east side of Pacific Avenue (near the juncture of Maple Street). "[Jacob] Schlueter, of Oakland is in town," a report in the Santa Cruz Sentinel noted that spring, "erecting his Roller Coaster, or gravity railroad, a substitute for riding downhill on the snow with a sled. Music every night, after opening, which will take place early in June."

The *Sentinel*, and its fervid competitor, the *Santa Cruz Surf*, competed for info on its development. "Work was commenced on the roller coaster this morning," the *Surf* noted a few days later. "It will take about ten days to complete the structure.



The track of the roller coaster will be about 500 feet in circumference and the highest point about 24 feet from the ground. At night the grounds and coaster will be illuminated by the electric light.” Total cost of the project was \$600.

The ride was extremely popular. On the Fourth of July weekend, the *Sentinel* published a front-page poem titled “The Roller Coaster,” written by R.M. Coates exclusively for the paper. It concluded:

*A one-eyed man, with crooked leg,*

*Upon the cushion sat.*

*And as he darted through the air,*

*He lost his Derby hat.*

*I had no money in my purse;*

*My watch I put in soak;*

*Then rode the coaster up and down,*

*Till I was fairly broke.*

By October of the following year, however, the *Sentinel* reported that “the roller coaster would be removed to the

grounds back of the bathhouses [in Beach Flats], before the opening of the next summer season.” By winter of the following year, a one-sentence notice in the Surf declared that “the old roller coaster has been torn down and sold for lumber.”

It never made it to the beach.

## **RIDE THE RAILS**

A little more than two decades later, on Sunday, May 31, 1908, above-the-fold headlines in the Sentinel declared “THAT ONE OF THE GREATEST OF SCENIC RAILWAYS” in the world would be coming to the Santa Cruz waterfront, at a cost of \$35,000. It was to be built by the prestigious L.A. Thompson Scenic Railroad Company out of New York City, with a straight track running nearly 1,050 feet—making it the longest ride of its kind in the U.S. at that time.

An Ohio-born grocery store operator named LaMarcus Adna Thompson had developed a passion for gravity rides dating back to the 1880s. He combined his business skills with a fundamental understanding of the laws of gravity and inertia to fashion a global empire. He would be called the “Father of the American Roller Coaster” and would eventually have six

so-called “scenic rides” on Coney Island alone.

Thompson was a perfect match for the Boardwalk’s reigning impresario, Fred W. Swanton (see *Good Times*, June 27, 2012), who was trumpeting the wonders and excitements of his beachfront amusement park and casino throughout the West. “It is already apparent,” the *Sentinel* reported, “[that] Thompson’s proposed ride will be a very graceful one, as the curves already constructed are beautiful.”

The Scenic Railway became an instant hit, and it outlasted the extravagant Swanton, who, in 1912, was unceremoniously ousted from his position with what was then known as the Beach Company. By 1915, the financially bereft enterprise was reconstituted as the Santa Cruz Seaside Company, with Swanton persona non grata anywhere near the waterfront.

## UPS AND DOWNS

And so it was that in 1923 another beachfront entrepreneur with unbridled ambition came to town. Arthur Looff, the 35-year-old son of the famed carousel wood-carver, Charles I.D. Looff, who had fashioned the Boardwalk’s celebrated Merry-Go-Round in 1911, proposed a larger, much more exciting replacement to the Scenic Railway: the Giant Dipper, his

biggest project to date (it had a sibling coaster in San Francisco known as the “Big Dipper”). He envisioned a “combination earthquake, balloon ascension and aeroplane drop.”

My friend Ted Whiting III, the Boardwalk’s former vice president of Legacy Affairs (and who remains its unofficial historian), has always emphasized the significance of “concessionaires” in the Seaside Company’s history. Private entrepreneurs leased space or land at the Boardwalk for their own subsidiary enterprises; the Seaside Company, especially in its early years, left the cost of risky innovations to others. The Dipper was no exception.

As a result, the Seaside Company did not fund nor construct the Giant Dipper—Arthur Looff did. In February of 1924, the *Santa Cruz Evening News* proclaimed: “Arthur Looff, the owner and builder, is one of the foremost men in the amusement world of the Pacific coast, with a long record of successful operations. The amusement devices he has built have shown continuous improvement so that we are assured of the very latest and most thrilling ride on the coast.”

Visitors swarmed from all over to ride the coaster. By the summer of 1928, revenues had grown considerably. But the

Wall Street Crash of October 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression cut Boardwalk revenues substantially in ensuing years. The accruing interest on Looff's initial \$60,000 investment, along with his lease, became too much to bear. By 1933, Looff initially threatened to move the ride to Long Beach, then called it quits and sold his once crown jewel for what was rumored to be a dime on the dollar. But the Dipper now had a permanent home—and permanent ownership.

## **HIGH MAINTENANCE**

Nearly 70 million riders since its opening a century ago, the Dipper has undergone very few modifications over the years. The one major change was the installation, in 1984, of a pair of new trains, built by Morgan Manufacturing of Scotts Valley, which embrace both the classic look of woodies and the blessings of modern technology.

The secret sauce of the Dipper is that each and every day a crew of six special mechanics work the track and various mechanics of the operation; there's never a moment when the roller coaster is running that one of them isn't on hand.

As Canfield and I approach our destination, we are greeted by a pair of sturdy young men—Eddie Ernes, a graduate of San

Lorenzo Valley High who serves as supervisor of the mechanics crew, and Neil Kunkel, a graduate of Santa Cruz High who I recognize as an all-league catcher from two decades ago.

Each morning, several hours before the ride opens to the general public, Kunkel explains, the crew covers the entire length of the tracks looking for any possible malfunction or hint of structural imperfection. “It’s a 100-year-old framework, made almost entirely of wood,” Ernes says. “While virtually every inch has been replaced from time to time, it’s still vulnerable. We’re vigilant every second of the day.” There’s never been an accident caused by either a mechanical or structural failure during its 100-year-history, and Ernes and his crew intend to keep it that way.

Sometimes these days I feel as though I’m put together with rubber bands and glue and could use a little maintenance myself. As I approach my 70th birthday—and after more than a few bouts with mortality—I’m a little concerned that I may implode or simply fall apart on the upcoming ride. Talking to Charles and the enthusiastic mechanics has given me a new confidence, and I jump into the train ready for a new adventure.

The first 15 seconds or so are encased in a tunnel of darkness as you pull up to Lift Hill. The climb is everything I've always remembered, slow, steady, with the clankity-clank, rat-tat-tat of the thick pulley chain beating out the soundtrack to the approach. The grand view at the top is still magnificently panoramic, and then there is that first rush down the hill (what Looff called the "Aeroplane Drop") and the hard centrifugal pull to the left of the hairpin turn and a constant flow of adrenalin. At first, I held on tight, but once I realized no body parts were about to fly off, I lifted my hands up in the air for the final sprint.

It's thrilling! It's life affirming! It's fun! What an absolute rush!

And then it's over. Six decades after my first ride I realize that the 100-year-old Giant Dipper was providing me with another rite of passage, albeit of a different sort. At 9 years old, I had my life before me, clueless about what to expect and why. I couldn't see beyond that first turn. Today, it's mostly the other way. The gravitational forces and laws of mortality hit us all. At some point we all take our last ride on the Dipper. But the one this morning, I feel fairly confident, will not be mine. Knock wood. There's still more track ahead.

*Special thanks to Seaside Company archivist Jessie Durant for providing archival photographs and documents for this story.*