

# “Wonderland”

*With one swift move of the hand at the big switchboard at “Wonderland” last night, Mayor Charles F. O’Neill of San Diego opened the big playground at Ocean Beach just as the clock struck seven. The blaze of light that followed was a startler to the crowds that were waiting outside the closed gates clamoring for admittance.*

*--San Diego Union, July 3, 1913.*



The public sneak preview of Wonderland, two days before its scheduled July 4 opening, delighted thousands of visitors. When Mayor O’Neill threw the switch, 22,000 tungsten lights illuminated the new amusement park at Ocean Beach. The entrance gates--framed by towering minarets--opened and the throngs poured in, accompanied by a band playing “America.”

For the official opening on July 4, the park added fireworks, with music from the Royal Marine Band. “The Battle in the Clouds” ran all day and into the evening, directed by Sig. Paglia, the “famous master of pyrotechnics,” and former director of displays for the King of Italy.

Over 20,000 people came on opening day. The Point Loma Railroad Company ran streetcars every 20 minutes from Fourth and Broadway for the 40 minute trip to Ocean Beach. Buses from Horton Plaza ferried people to the park, one vehicle every 30 minutes.

San Diegans had never seen anything like it. “The most carefully planned and constructed amusement park on the Pacific coast,” was built at the cost of \$300,000 on eight acres of concrete-paved land south of Voltaire, between Abbott Street and the ocean. Wonderland boasted of “40 attractions” including a dance pavilion, bowling alley, ½ acre children’s playground, roller skating rink, and a seawater bathing plunge.

A zoo featured lions, bears, leopards, wolves, mountain lions, a hyena, and 56 varieties of monkeys—all housed and “waiting for the givers of peanuts and popcorn.”

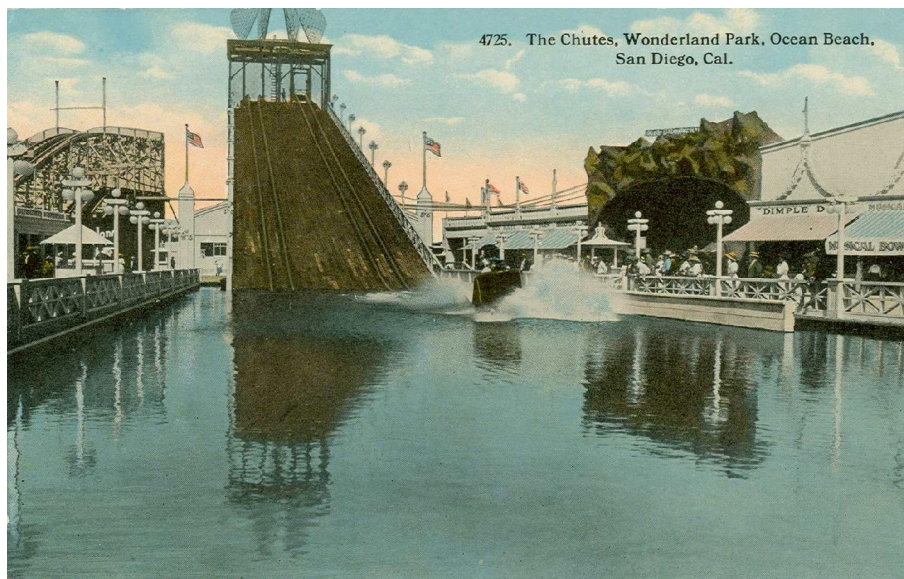
The fun zone--on the model of Coney Island’s famed Luna Park--included a water slide, carousel, carnival games, and the biggest roller coaster on the Pacific coast. The wooden

coaster, called the “Blue Streak Racer,” ran two cars, which raced each other on parallel tracks over a 3500-foot long course.

Reflecting the conservative mores of the day, the family-oriented Wonderland was advertised as “morally clean,” safe and wholesome. Violators of respectability risked expulsion. “There will be no ‘mashing’ anywhere in the park,” the management declared. Unseemly behavior in the Waldorf Ballroom required particular vigilance. To ensure there was no “turkey-trotting” or “bunny-hugging” on the dance floor, a Mrs. Margaret Madden kept a watchful eye.

Ruth Varney Held, in her book *Beach Town* (1975) recalled her experience at Wonderland as seven-year-old:

*I was there, starry-eyed. I paid my ten cents at the booth between the fancy towers, drifted in, and gasped in awe . . . Monkeyland charmed me first, with 350 monkeys making funny faces and reaching for tidbits. One was the mischievous Mr. Spider, advertised as “The oldest monkey in captivity,” who might reach out through the bars with his tail and whisk you hat off. My next love was the Chute-the-Chutes, a high, steep water-slide. Flat-bottomed boats shoved off from the top, to whoosh down into the pool below, spraying water over the shrieking passengers.*



Held would marvel at the apparent success of the park, noting that “one of the great wonders of Wonderland was how San Diego could support such a large amusement park.” After all, the population of San Diego barely exceeded 65,000 and Ocean Beach had perhaps 300 people.

Against such odds, Wonderland thrived for only two seasons. For all their careful planning, the operators of the park failed to consider the prospect of competition. The opening of the Panama-California Exposition in 1915 slashed attendance and the park fell into foreclosure. In March 1915, Wonderland was sold at auction.

To add insult to injury, stormy ocean tides undermined the foundations of the giant rollercoaster and closed the park’s premier attraction in January 1916. The Blue Streak Racer was dismantled and shipped to Santa Monica where it ran at the Pleasure Pier for many years.

The most enduring legacy of Wonderland would be its small zoo. When the Panama-California fair began in Balboa Park, the menagerie was rented to the Exposition company for \$40 a day. Housed in a series of cages near Indian Village on Park Blvd., the collection of animals was eventually sold to the City for \$500. The well-traveled animals would appear again when the San Diego Zoo opened in 1922.

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