



Funworld

Celebrate the Past: Ride **Back in Time at Coney Island**

November 1, 2018 By Arthur Levine

Celebrating the past of an American icon

in our collective consciousness.

it all.



phenomenon, and even before IAAPA was founded, there was Coney Island. As with many storied places in New York City, this classic amusement mecca is etched

Long before Disneyland, before roller coasters evolved into an international

Coney Island conjures a riot of sights and sounds that recalls both a simpler time and a wilder time: screaming passengers aboard the many white-latticed roller coasters that dotted the boardwalk; the stately spires and statues at Dreamland; riders mounting the "Steeplechase's" mechanical steeds; cars swinging and swaying on the "Wonder Wheel"; the clanging of the carousels' band organs

bleeding into the clamor of the crowd; the "Parachute Jump" towering high above

This Brooklyn outpost was many things, including an oceanside refuge for teeming

masses seeking relief from the city's summertime inferno. It was a proverbial melting pot, bringing people from many cultures and classes together in a kind of grand social experiment. It was a place where immigrants could open a business and pursue their American dream. But more than anything, Coney Island was a beloved amusement area. Its importance to the attractions industry cannot be overstated. It was where seminal events, such as the debut of LaMarcus Thompson's "Gravity Pleasure Switch Back Railway," helped launch the modern era of amusement parks. As

Coney Island expanded in the early 1900s, it secured its place as the epicenter of

the burgeoning industry. It wasn't just the 3.5 miles of rides and attractions that lined the boardwalk. It was where many of the most prominent ride manufacturers set up their shops. In addition to Thompson, legendary designers, entrepreneurs, and businesses such as Charles I.D. Looff, M.C. Illions and Sons Carousell (sic) Works, and the W.F. Mangels Company were all based in Coney Island. The manufacturers would use the amusement area as both a laboratory to test their ride innovations and a showcase to market them. It's not all past tense, however. While the seaside amusement park has had its ups and downs, there's a resurgence of development and preservation efforts recently. At about three square blocks, the core amusement area today is a shadow of the sprawling 23 blocks of parks, rides, bathhouses, food concessions, bungalow colonies, and other attractions that used to greet visitors in Coney Island's heyday.

Still, along with newer additions, a surprising number of treasured elements

remain. And there are vestiges of the past, some hidden and some hiding in plain

For those who make the pilgrimage to Coney Island, several resources are available

Magical History Tour One place to start is the free-admission Exhibition Center of the Coney Island History Project, located on West 12th Street in a building that was formerly a

bathhouse. There you'll find a funky animated Cyclops figure that used to sit atop

the "Spook-A-Rama" dark ride, handwritten operating instructions for the "Wonder

Wheel" scribbled on a piece of cardboard, and many other artifacts crammed into the small space. You'll also find volunteers eager to share their knowledge.

sight, waiting to be discovered.

to help visitors celebrate the past.

Charles Denson is the History Project's executive director. Growing up in the Coney Island neighborhood, he has an abiding love for and fascination with the amusement area that was his childhood playground. "The history of Coney Island is really a cultural history that is the history of America," Denson says. "Everyone can relate to it. It's important to preserve it."

Carol and Jerry Albert, the former owners and operators of Astroland (which is now part of Luna Park) and the founders of the History Project, to advance the nonprofit's mission. In addition to the exhibition center, the organization records

oral history interviews and honors Coney Island Hall of Fame inductees.

As the historian and author of "Coney Island: Lost and Found," Denson joined with

Horrified by the closing of Steeplechase Park in 1964 when he was 12 years old, the precocious Denson aligned with the Coney Island Chamber of Commerce and began conducting tours of the amusement area. He wanted to help tell the area's story before it was gone altogether. Perhaps inspired by Denson's work as an adolescent, the History Project presents walking tours.

historians conduct the tours and incorporate archival photos to help illustrate their

The Walking Tours of Coney Island are small-group, 1.5-hour tours that offer

fascinating insights into the past and present of the amusement area. Local

spiels—like how the famous "Parachute Jump" was originally conceived as a

military training device. In addition, tour guides share how ride operators would intentionally stop the ride midway up so that passengers would scream and draw a crowd. Plus, Feltman's (credited as originating the hot dog), served thousands of meals at a time from the world's largest restaurant. One of its employees, Nathan Handwerker, opened his own Coney Island stand, undercut Feltman's, and eventually became a hot dog hero with the aptly named Nathan's Famous. Celebrating the Past, Building the Future

Head to the second floor of the historic Childs Restaurant building on Surf Avenue

to visit the Coney Island Museum and you can ogle vintage bumper cars, funhouse

mirrors, old roller coaster seats, antique postcards, and more artifacts from the

amusement area's glorious past. An exhibit about beach culture history includes

The museum is run by Coney Island USA, which also presents a circus sideshow and organizes the famous Mermaid Parade. Presiding over the organization is its charismatic founder and artistic director, Dick Zigun, aka the "Mayor of Coney

Island" ("permanently unelected," he wryly notes). Calling the beachside

rental bathing suits improbably made of wool.

community home since the 1970s, Zigun enjoys celebrating and sharing its past. But he is heartened and upbeat about its present and future, as well, ticking off milestones such as a new hotel that is under development; the remodeled Stillwell Terminal, which is one of the world's largest subway stations; the opening of MCU Park, home of the Brooklyn Cyclones minor league baseball team; and the investment and stewardship of Zamperla, the amusement company that operates

Luna Park. "We are running out of acreage," Zigun says about the recent flurry of development. He believes it will inevitably lead to an expansion of the current amusement area. "People are going to be surprised in a few years. There's going to be a solid tourist-friendly strip." Denson is also encouraged that Zamperla is using Luna Park to feature its latest attractions, just like industry pioneers did over a century ago. Today, Coney Island is a combination of some of the oldest, most beloved rides, while serving as a showroom for the manufacturer's newest rides.

"The History Project is not about nostalgia and longing for the past. It's about the

experience that is passed down from generation to generation. It's a magical,

area's future and what endures," Denson adds. "Coney Island is a shared

Island Oases: The Past is Present at These **Coney Island Spots**

Attractions industry fans may regard Coney Island as a shrine, but it is more

thriving slice of Americana. Even though the following attractions have

than a place to be studied and admired from a detached distance. It is a living,

survived for many decades, visitors are enjoying them today for the intrinsic fun and thrills they provide. Some are even oblivious to their historical significance. "Coney Island Cyclone"—The grand dame of the Brooklyn amusement area may be one of the world's most famous roller coasters. Opened in 1927, the

engineering offers stationary cars and gondolas that swing along tracks embedded in the frame of the wheel. Either way, passengers get spectacular views of Coney Island and the Manhattan skyline. Classic Kiddie Rides—Deno's Wonder Wheel Park is also home to historic flat

"Cyclone" still uses manual, mechanical brake levers, and forgoes seat dividers.

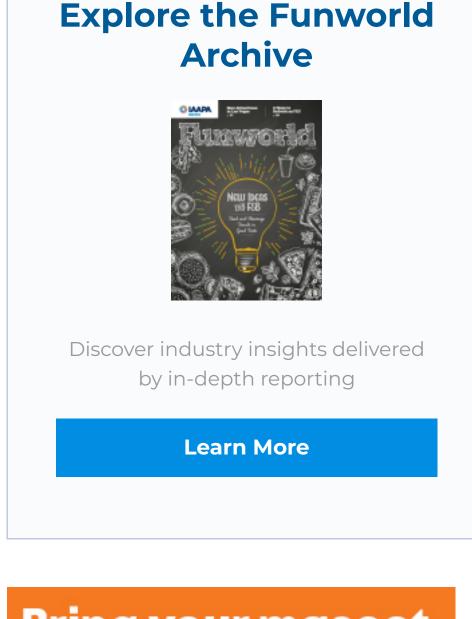
It also still delivers a ride sometimes imitated, but never duplicated.

"Spook-A-Rama"—Coney Island's last remaining permanently installed dark ride, and one of the few from the Pretzel Amusement Ride Company, is still operating at Deno's. Dating back to 1955, "Spook-A-Rama" endures as a

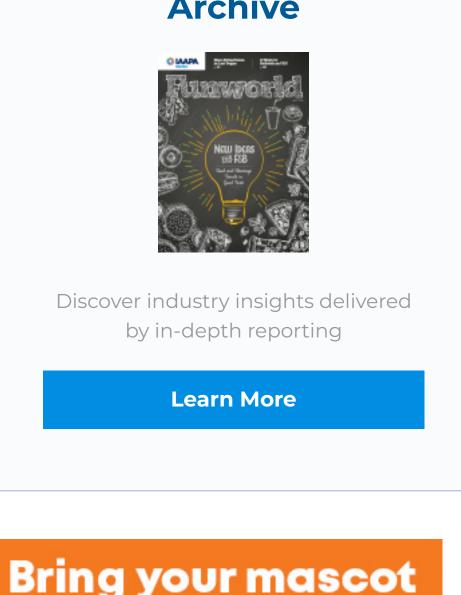
Island's only surviving antique carousel (although you can no longer grab the brass ring). Nathan's Famous—When it opened in 1916, Nathan's charged a nickel for a

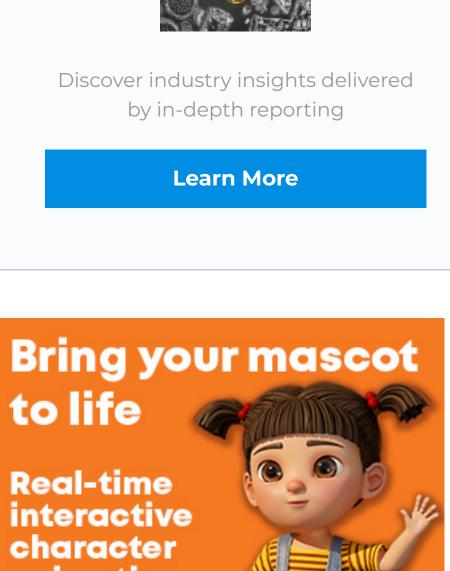
hot dog. You'll have to shell out more than that today. While the price

serves delicious fare.











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special place."

rides, including "Fire Engines" and "Pony Carts," manufactured by the W.F. Mangels Company. To operate the attractions, attendants still use the original red ride control boxes, embossed with the name "Mangels."

scary/campy delight. "B&B Carousell"—Manufactured by Mangels in 1906, "B&B Carousell" is Coney

changed, the same great taste remains. Gargiulo's Restaurant—Dating back to 1907, the highly rated Italian eatery still

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