

# Coney Island History Project showcases area's amusement history

AT: Ron Gustafson

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BROOKLYN, N.Y. — Coney Island, the seaside amusement center that has been a staple in the lives of New Yorkers for nearly a century and a half, shows no signs of slowing down.

From the rumbling thrills aboard Luna Park's iconic Cyclone roller coaster, which opened in 1927, to the awe-inspiring Wonder Wheel (1920) at the adjacent Deno's Wonder Wheel Amusement Park, Coney Island has gone through many physical changes throughout the years, yet maintained much of its storied identity.

Preserving much of the past for visitors — as well as Web surfers — to enjoy is the not-for-profit Coney Island History Project. Located in a meager two-room building at 3059 West 12th Street, in the shadows of the Wonder Wheel, the exhibit center is packed with all sorts of memorabilia from yesteryear and offers free admission. Historian and author Charles Denson is the project's executive director and organizes the collection into special exhibitions.

"We were actually founded as an oral history organization in 2004 by Carol Hill Albert and Jerome Albert in honor of Dewey Albert (Jerome's father), creator of Astroland



Park," noted Tricia Vita, administrative director of the history project. "In addition, we had a booth on Surf Avenue as Carol Albert, who was running the Cyclone at the time, offered us space in a store under the coaster (2007)."

Even after Astroland's (1962-2008) demise, the history project remained in its original location under the renowned Cyclone for a few years. In 2011, the Vourderis family, owners of Deno's, invited the history project to its current 12th Street digs and also allowed for educational exhibits to be set up in the park during the park's season.

"We were still under the Cyclone while the Alberts continued to operate the coaster (2009-2010), and then gracefully transitioned to our present location at



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the Wonder Wheel," Vita said of the move.

## Cache of interviews

There are currently more than 400 interviews online in the vast archive, which is easily searchable by theme, decade and places of interest at Coney Island. Scrolling through the dozens of categories, browsers will find subjects of interest such as restau

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The exhibit center, though small in stature, is packed with artifacts from former operations and attractions at Coney Island. One of the highlights is an original Steeplechase amusement ride horse (above right). COURTESY CONEY ISLAND HISTORY PROJECT



The Coney Island History Project display features a cyclops head from the classic Spookarama dark ride once housed at Deno's Wonder Wheel Park. COURTESY CONEY ISLAND HISTORY PROJECT



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rants, acrobats, carousels and other amusement rides.

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"One of the two rooms is open-air with a Cyclops head from Deno's 1950s Spookarama dark ride displayed," Vita said. "Everyone is intrigued by it, especially the children. Actually, it's very striking."

Other pieces of interest include an original Steeplechase amusement ride horse, signage from Astroland, carousel and dark ride artifacts and hundreds of photos.

### From 1823

The oldest surviving artifact, according to Vita, is an 1823 Toll House sign.

"It has prices for different horses and carriages to and from the island," she explained. "That transpor-

tation was a little as 5 cents during that era."

The year was also special as it marked the 60th anniversary of the founding of Astroland. It was coined as "a space-age attraction at the dawn of the space race."

To mark the occasion, Denson created a permanent exhibit of history panels which were installed in front of the Astroland Moon Rocket at Deno's Wonder Wheel Park.

And Vita was quick to explain that Coney Island History Project should not be confused with Coney Island USA, which operates a nearby museum and theater.

She went on to say: "the difference is that Coney Island USA started as performance-based with theater, sideshows and burlesque. They, too, are not-for-profit."

### Staying busy

Denson also remains occupied with organiz-

ing photos and other memorabilia. Of particular interest was a recent exhibit which featured vintage stereoviews and the history of the Wonder Wheel. Guests were treated to using a handful of antique viewers to enjoy some of the classic scenes captured at Coney Island. While a variety of sizes existed during that era, most stereoview photos were a little larger than standard postcards.

The Coney Island History Project also has a Hall Of Fame. The website pays tribute to more than a dozen iconic individuals who helped shape not only the resort but also the amusement industry.

The project also hosts a podcast titled "Coney Island Stories," with installments on its website.

This year the podcast focused on "growing up in Coney Island from the 1930s to 2000s."

•[coneyislandhistory.org](http://coneyislandhistory.org)