

WALKING TOUR OF THE HISTORIC

SANTA CRUZ BEACH BOARDWALK



Santa Cruz Casino and Natatorium, circa 1907

Santa Cruz Beach
Boardwalk

The Boardwalk Story

Once upon a time . . . the Pacific Coast sported a string of boardwalks and seaside amusement facilities. Then, one by one, the Pike in Long Beach, Playland in San Francisco, and parks in Venice and Portland all disappeared.

Some became housing developments or fell prey to the ravages of time and wear. The laughter of excited children and the smell of popcorn and cotton candy faded into the realm of memory.

Those memories are still being made, however, at the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk. The Boardwalk is now the only major seaside amusement park on the entire West Coast. As California Historic Landmark #983, the park is an example of true perseverance and dedication to a tradition of combining nostalgia with high tech fun.

Santa Cruz beach became a tourist attraction in the 1860s, when public bathhouses opened along the coast from the mouth of the San Lorenzo River to Cowell's Beach. Several more followed, and soon concessions sprang up nearby—including restaurants, curio shops, and photograph stands.

Toward the end of the 19th century, Fred W. Swanton, considered one of the greatest local promoters of his time, laid plans for a casino and boardwalk. The Neptune Casino opened in 1904, but operated only 22 months; on June 22, 1906, the ornate but uninsured building was completely destroyed by a fire.

Legend has it that Swanton was on the phone before the last wisps of smoke disappeared, lining up financing and ordering materials to rebuild. By summer's end, famed architect William H. Weeks was drawing up plans; and in October a foundation was laid for the new Casino, complete with a grand ballroom, the Plunge indoor swimming pool, a pleasure pier, and boardwalk, all of which opened June 15, 1907.

Later in the year, construction began on the Boardwalk's first thrill ride, the L.A. Thompson Scenic Railway, which opened in 1908. In 1911, renowned European woodcarver Charles I.D. Loeff delivered a new merry-go-round with three rows of hand-carved horses. The carousel is still operating today, accompanied by its original 342-pipe Ruth band organ, built in 1894.

It was Loeff's son, Arthur, who convinced the Boardwalk to replace the Scenic Railway ride with a "modern" wooden roller coaster. The Giant Dipper coaster opened May 17, 1924 and soon became the park's most popular ride; it has carried more than 68 million riders and joins the carousel as a National Historic Landmark.

During the 1930s and 1940s, business at the Boardwalk tapered off due to the Great Depression and World War II, but the Cocoanut Grove ballroom was in its prime, featuring dancing with some of the biggest names of the big band era.

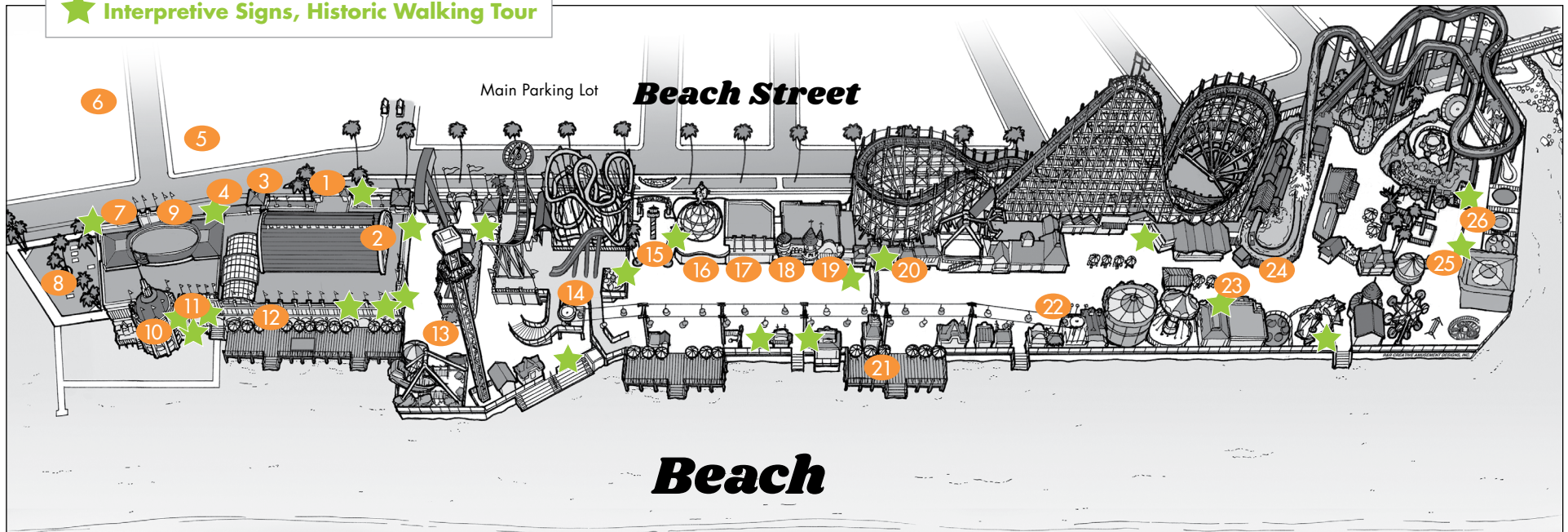
The Boardwalk and Cocoanut Grove continue to thrive as a major California destination. The park offers more than 40 rides and attractions, four arcades with hundreds of modern video games, a game deck, 22 midway games, 42 food locations, an electronic shooting gallery, and 9 gift shops with everything from beachwear to jewelry. The Cocoanut Grove complex hosts a variety of events: trade shows, conferences, dances, parties, conventions, banquets, and wedding receptions.

The historic park is fronted by a mile-long beach—the same unique beach that launched Santa Cruz as a tourist attraction more than a century ago.

The Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk is open daily for Spring Break and Summer and most weekends and holidays during the year. There is still no admission charge.

400 Beach Street - Santa Cruz, CA 95060
(831) 423-5590 | beachboardwalk.com

★ Interpretive Signs, Historic Walking Tour



Begin:

Enter Neptune's Kingdom from Beach Street.

1. Neptune's Kingdom

From 1907 to 1963, this building housed a large heated salt-water swimming pool known as the Plunge or Natatorium (the Latin word for swimming pool). Inside, the great steel arches of the original bathing plunge are still visible overhead.

A magnificent plaster bas-relief of King Neptune once gazed down at bathers entering the building from the beach. Inside, a full-figured, larger than life-size statue of Neptune watched the pool from the balcony, attended by plaster water babies who played along the walls.

Ladies were admitted free, when accompanied by a gentleman. Scratchy woolen bathing suits, towels, and changing rooms were rented from uniformed

attendants, or you could sit in the gallery and watch the fun while listening to a band.

Next, walk past Roll-A-Bingo and turn to the left to see photographs of the famous salt-water Plunge, the scene of death-defying water carnival acts, and record-setting swim competitions. For over 50 years, nearly every kid in Santa Cruz learned to swim here, until excessive repairs forced closure of the aging pool.



Santa Cruz Plunge, 1946

Take either stairway, or the Lighthouse elevator, to second floor Historium.

2. Historium

Take a walk through Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk history along the Historium on the second floor of Neptune's Kingdom. Bathers and fun-lovers have come to Santa Cruz Beach since the 1850s, although it's hard to see how they could have had much fun in heavy, itchy woolen bathing suits covering neck to knees! Bathhouses featuring heated salt-water pools, restaurants, shops, and game rooms lined the beach through the turn of the century.

In 1904, a brash young promoter named Fred Swanton built the Neptune Casino—a wedding cake of a building decorated with onion domes and housing a theater, ballroom, laundry, penny arcade, ice cream shop, and telephone office—all topped with a sky full of fluttering flags.

He was undaunted when it burned to the ground two years later, and by 1907 had replaced it with the buildings you see today. The Historium exhibit

case commemorates the history of Fred Swanton's Natatorium, before it became Neptune's Kingdom.

Return to the Neptune's Kingdom Beach Street entrance to continue the walking tour outdoors. Along the way be sure to check out the interpretive signs located throughout the park, see map for locations.

3. Southern Pacific Railroad

Be sure to stay outside the painted yellow safety lines next to the railroad tracks—during the summer, 2500 tons of train still rumble by along Beach Street four times a day.

Until 1960, Boardwalk visitors stepped off the Suntan Special to the rousing strains of the Beach Band, which greeted each train with blazing brass. Today Roaring Camp Railroads still brings visitors to the Boardwalk through the redwoods from Felton.



Arrival of the Suntan Special, 1941

4. Coconut Grove, Entrance B

Beach promoter Fred Swanton hired architect William H. Weeks after the 1906 fire to replace the onion-domed Neptune Casino with a Moorish style seaside dance pavilion, shops, and casino arcade. The lively Casino and the adjoining Mission Revival style Natatorium put Santa Cruz on the map as the "Coney Island of the West."



Cocoanut Grove Ballroom, 1947

A 1953 modernization and 1980 remodel of the Casino saved eye-catching architectural elements of the original 1907 building, such as the round Moorish style window set in a Mission Revival style tower. Entrance B opens for Cocoanut Grove guests heading up to the glass-roofed Sun Room overlooking Monterey Bay.

5. Casa del Rey Hotel

Across the street in the parking lot, the pair of graceful palms once marked the entrance to the Casa del Rey Hotel, a landmark three-story Mission Revival/Pueblo style building with sheltered formal gardens, erected in 1911 by the owners of the Boardwalk.

It enjoyed a long life as a beach convention hotel linked to the Casino by an overhead enclosed



Casa del Rey Hotel, 1911

bridge, then became a residence hotel, a U.S. Navy hospital, and finally a retirement home. It was severely damaged during the October 17, 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake and was demolished in November 1989.

From 1903 to 1907, the hotel site sported a colorful tent city operated by Fred Swanton, who replaced the multi-hued striped tents with tiny cottages after rebuilding the Casino.

Several of the cottages were purchased and moved around town when the Casa del Rey Hotel was constructed, and some can still be spotted today. Your sharp eyes may find several at the corner of the main parking lot.

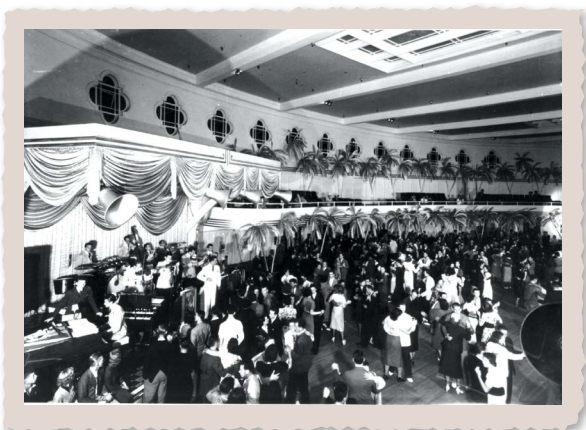
6. Boardwalk Bowl

Turn your attention to the other side of Cliff Street. Bowling activity on the Boardwalk dates back to a 1909 concessionaire-operated 4-lane "duckpin" alley located on the site of today's Haunted Castle. Eventually, bowling moved to Cliff Street when Surf Bowl opened in 1958. The Santa Cruz Seaside Company purchased it in 1994 and transitioned it into the state-of-the-art Boardwalk Bowl in 2001. To learn more about the history, visit the history exhibit in the Pro-Shop.

Continue west and stop in front of Entrance A.

7. Coconut Grove, Entrance A

Looking through the glass doors you'll see crystal chandeliers and an opulent staircase that leads to the grand ballroom. Just around the corner, a 1953 Modern style façade masks the original ballroom entrance—once a dazzling display of lights that drew thousands to dance to Benny Goodman, Paul Whiteman, Kay Kyser, Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, and other top jazz and swing orchestras.



Coconut Grove Ballroom, 1947

8. Aloha Terrace

From the Aloha Terrace at the Cocoanut Grove's west entrance there is a fine view of the municipal wharf, the last of four commercial shipping and fishing wharves on the Santa Cruz waterfront since 1849. Majestic *Washingtonia robusta* palms rise to the bay breezes here at the old Cocoanut Grove entrance and along Beach Street toward the wharf. Forty-two palms were planted as four-foot high specimens in 1962 by Santa Cruz Seaside Company President Laurence Canfield, who donated half of them to the City of Santa Cruz.

Across Beach Street you can still see the tiled bell tower, marking what was the La Bahia apartment complex, built in 1926, as a companion to the Casa del Rey Hotel. The buildings were clustered around two interior courtyards with fountains, designed to suggest a Mediterranean village.

[Return to Casino Arcade, main entrance.](#)

9. Arcade

A neon CASINO sign marks both the original ornate 1907 Penny Arcade and its 1953 transformation to modern style. No gambling took place in the Casino, which housed displays, shops, and games, but the enterprising Swanton anchored a large sailing schooner just off the beach where, it was said, adults could test their luck after taking a 10-cent water taxi ride.

Today, challengers match wits and skill with fast-paced electronic arcade games beneath the gracefully decorated original 1907 columns.

[Walk through the Arcade, toward the beach, and step into the colonnade.](#)



View through arcade and shops, 1907

10. Beach Casino

The rounded form of the Casino's rotunda now houses Seaside Fish & Chowder downstairs and the Bay View Room upstairs in the Cocoanut Grove. Its shape was constructed to echo the lines of the original Neptune Casino built on this site in 1904.

An outrageous mixture of Turkish, Persian and Indian fantasy, festooned with domes and flags and built entirely of wood, the Neptune Casino housed the town's finest restaurant on its upper floor. The Casino

burned to the ground in a fire that started in the Casino Restaurant on June 22, 1906.



Neptune Casino fire, June 22, 1906

Fred Swanton, often called the "P. T. Barnum" of Santa Cruz Beach, immediately began promoting a new Casino on the site, and crews began construction of the buildings you see today. The new Casino opened with a Grand Ball on June 15, 1907, a truly amazing feat and a tribute to the armies of craftsmen and construction crews of the day.

11. Marini's Candies

On this end of the colonnade, you'll see Marini's Candies. The family started out selling popcorn on the Boardwalk in 1915. Their salt water taffy is a Santa Cruz seaside tradition. This shop has been open and operated by the Marini family since 1928, and the taffy-wrapping machine behind the candy counter dates back to 1922. You'll often find candy makers at work in the windows.

12. Colonnade

The view along the arches of the old plunge building hasn't changed since the covered seaside promenade was added for strolling visitors in 1911. Above was the Palm Court Room of the Natatorium, fitted with wicker tables, chairs, and potted palms. Here ladies enjoyed a quiet cup of tea overlooking the sea, while youngsters

and spouses frolicked in the salty Plunge. Follow the sound of raucous laughter to a display featuring the famous Laffing Sal from Playland-at-the-Beach in San Francisco. An exhibit about seaside parks is located opposite Laffing Sal.

Stroll down the colonnade to Cap'n Jack Flint's Pirate Ship, and begin a tour of the Boardwalk.

13. The Boardwalk

Many of the earliest rides on the Boardwalk were operated by itinerant concessionaires, who set up the rides here in the summer and moved them elsewhere in the winter. Now the Santa Cruz Seaside Company owns and operates all rides, while some shops and food stops are leased by concessionaires.

In 2007, the year the park celebrated its Centennial, it was awarded the prestigious Golden Ticket for World's Best Seaside Amusement Park by the amusement industry. The Boardwalk won that award eleven more times before achieving Golden Ticket Legend status in 2019.

14. Speed Bumps, Sky Glider

The first bumper car ride, Dodge-Ems, was installed in 1922, and the first rider drew lots of laughs when the spinning car failed to respond to his command of, "Whoa!" Dodge-Ems was replaced in 1940 with cars from the Treasure Island World's Fair and has been updated since. The latest renovation came in 1996 when it received new cars from Italy and a new name: Speed Bumps.

The 1000-foot-long Sky Glider was added in 1967, offering a bird's-eye view of the Boardwalk. The technology was developed in the ski lift industry,

leading to a compact ride that fit the Boardwalk's limited space and offers visitors a relaxing ride over many of the park's colorful attractions.

Continue to Entrance 3, near the Carousel.



Dodge-Ems, 1961

15. Historic Landmark Plaque & Original Board Walk Samples

Pause to take a look at the two plaques on either side of Lighthouse Lift-Off. In 1989, the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk and Coconut Grove were declared a State Historic Landmark, in recognition of their continuous contribution to the economy and industries of the State of California since 1907. A spirit of historic preservation guides company policy to preserve and maintain historic buildings and rides for future generations to enjoy.

Originally, the Boardwalk was a walk made of boards, elevating fun seekers above the sandy beach. The last remains of the old boardwalk were replaced or covered with sturdy concrete decks over an engineered seawall in 1960.

16. Loeff Carousel

The beautiful whirling Carousel has been the pride of the Boardwalk since it was installed new in 1911. The Carousel boasts hand-carved antique wooden horses and chariots created by world-famous European wood-carver Charles I.D. Loeff.

The Loeff horses are identifiable by their jeweled saddles and bridles, elaborately carved flowing manes, slender prancing legs, and by intricate carvings beneath the cantle of the saddle. Look for angels and cherubs, pomegranates, and rabbits. Loeff was the first carousel designer to add lights as decoration, dazzling the riders with his brilliant displays. The Loeff horses are now very rare—none were made after 1918. The carousel even has a mechanical ring machine, one of only a handful left in the country. The carousel is a National Historic Landmark—an honor awarded only to historic places that have contributed substantially to the engineering, architectural, and cultural history of the nation.



Loeff Carousel, 1968

A Ruth und Sohn organ built in 1894 was installed along with the carousel in 1911. The Boardwalk acquired a rare Wurlitzer 165 Band Organ in 2007. The colorful Wurlitzer, built in 1918, came from San Francisco's Playland like Laffing Sal. A smaller Wurlitzer 146 was added in 2011.

17. Octopus' Garden

Continuing down the Boardwalk, you'll see an example of 1950s architecture dubbed Googie style after the Los Angeles restaurant that made it famous. Once dismissed as American bad taste, Googie has come into its own in architectural history. It features boomerang shapes, soaring lines that abruptly switch directions like a flying saucer in flight, and pierced structural beams that highlight the inherent strength of modern building materials.

18. Haunted Castle

Dark rides are a feature of every boardwalk—places to be scared out of your wits, then come back out into the sunlight. This ride, which opened in 1980, replaced a 1931 Dante's Inferno, the 1934 Laff-Land, and three pirate-themed dark rides.

19. Ice Cream Stand

Adjoining the Haunted Castle is a tiny ice cream stand boasting a black and white ceramic tile façade and chrome streamlined overhang. The Lane family opened four Frozen Custard stands on the Boardwalk in 1935 and ran them for three generations until 1954. This is the only original custard stand remaining and is operated by Whiting's foods. Another longtime concessionaire, the Whiting family has been in business at the Boardwalk since 1953.

20. Giant Dipper

The Giant Dipper opened to screams in 1924 and was constructed at a cost of \$50,000 using 14 miles of lumber laid end to end, 862 gallons of paint, and 3150 light bulbs. The train travels at speeds up to 46

MPH along 1/2 mile of track and that heart-stopping first hill is a 70-foot drop. Coaster mechanics walk the track to inspect the ride many times daily. The braking system, track, and cars have all been updated with the latest in ride safety technology.



Routine Giant Dipper maintenance at the top, 1959

Along with the Loeff Carousel, it was named a National Historic Landmark. Coaster riders have been even more enthusiastic: the Giant Dipper consistently rates among the ten best coaster rides in

the world! Still, most riders would agree with D.R. Kiff, who was among the first to ride it on May 17, 1924: "There were about three minutes of more thrills packed under our epidermis than we got out of the San Francisco earthquake. The missus had a strangle-hold on the rail in front, but after the first big dip she let go all holds and grabbed something more tangible which was me and hung on the rest of the way . . ."

Before you leave the Giant Dipper entrance area, walk over to the beach railing for more history.

21. Beach Overlook

The beach has been the scene of every kind of activity over the years, from hot-air balloon landings to soap opera star swoonings. The first private changing rooms were provided by an area landowner in the 1860s, and some were mounted on horse-drawn wagons. To enforce modesty and protect women bathers from view, the ladies bathed inside the wagons, which were pulled into the surf and then returned to the beach.

Newspaper editors were outraged by the indecent Santa Cruz bathers, especially men whose "shaggy

shanks" were visible below their long-john style bathing trousers. In later years, the Santa Cruz police chief arrested men who attempted to lounge on the beach without bathing shirts.

All that changed in the Roaring Twenties. The first Miss California Beauty Pageant took place right here in 1924 and continued into the 1970s. The Hollywood film industry has favored the Santa Cruz Beach as the setting for tales of romance, adventure, intrigue and comedy, and the site has been seen by millions on national television.

22. Sky Glider Platform, East

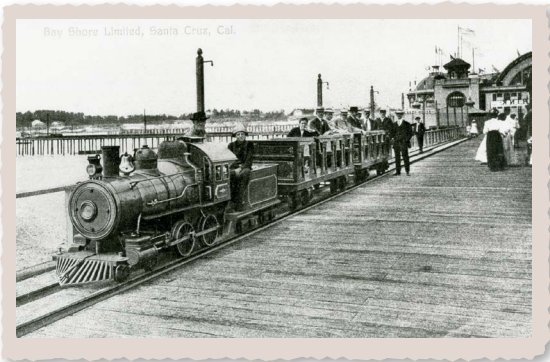
This is the site of the L. A. Thompson Scenic Railway. This first thrill ride at the Boardwalk was built in 1908. L.A. Thompson's Scenic Railway carried passengers up and down a series of gentle hills on a one-mile track where they experienced four minutes of "scenic excitement." The Scenic Railway was removed in 1923 to make way for the Giant Dipper roller coaster—and riders who thought the Giant Dipper would be more of the same got the surprise of their lives!

23. Funland Arcade

The Funland Arcade marks a site of Fred Swanton's 1907 Bay Shore Limited, a scaled-down steam train that ran the length of the Boardwalk. In spite of its size, it required a licensed engineer and fireman to operate and was so powerful it was removed and leased to a logging company during the winter off-season. The



Miss California, 1925



Coastline Railroad, 1909

popular train ride was replaced by the Sun Tan Jr. steam train, then the City of Santa Cruz streamliner, which ran from 1938 until the beginning of WWII.

Be sure to stop by and visit Leo the paper-eating Lion who returned to the Boardwalk in 2019 after almost 20 years in retirement and an extensive renovation.

24. Logger's Revenge

Water rides have been popular in amusement parks nation-wide since the first "Shoot the Chutes" dumped folks in the drink in 1895 at Coney Island. A "Chute the Chutes" water slide was a big hit near the river in the 1920s. Over the years, the rides have become steeper and wetter. The Logger's Revenge was installed here in 1977.

25. Cave Train Overlook

On-track rides have been a fixture at the Boardwalk since former road-racing champion Major Earl Clipperly placed midget racers on an open racetrack at this location in 1938. The Autorama introduced a safer rail-guided ride in scaled-down sports cars in

1962, and Walt Disney visited to take a look at the design. The Great Auto Race followed, operating from 1985 to 1999.

The Cave Train to the Lost World opened with a prehistoric theme in 1961, built along with an extensive engineered seawall construction project. The Cave Train and the Great Auto Race were both influenced by high-tech rides introduced at Disneyland, the world's newest and most remarkable amusement park of the time. A major renovation project in 1998-99 was implemented to strengthen the Cave Train Plaza; the revamped Cave Train Adventure opened in May 2000.



Midget racers, 1928

26. San Lorenzo River

Kiddie rides overlook the very beginnings of Santa Cruz Beach concessions. Across the river sits the location of Stephen Washburn's boating concession near the San Lorenzo River railroad bridge, described in 1875 as "the most beautiful little rowboats ever seen here." Washburn's Moonlight Boating cruises were very popular in the 1890s, and his hand-built wooden boats were admired by all.

John Leibrandt erected a few changing houses in this area for his ocean-bathing friends in 1865, and the idea quickly developed into commercial bathhouses further down the beach.

The City's lifeguard corps began here in 1870, when Charles Arcan patrolled Leibrandt's bathing beach and later received a gold watch engraved, "From the grateful parents of Phillip Figel for saving his life from a watery grave at Santa Cruz, June 12, 1879."

A return via Entrance 5 will take you streetside to walk the length of the Giant Dipper. Following the railroad tracks back towards








Rowboats on the San Lorenzo, 1895

Neptune's Kingdom, you can get an unobstructed view of the classic wooden structure.

For even more Santa Cruz, Beach Boardwalk history, check out:

The Never a Dull Moment Blog - blog.beachboardwalk.com

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