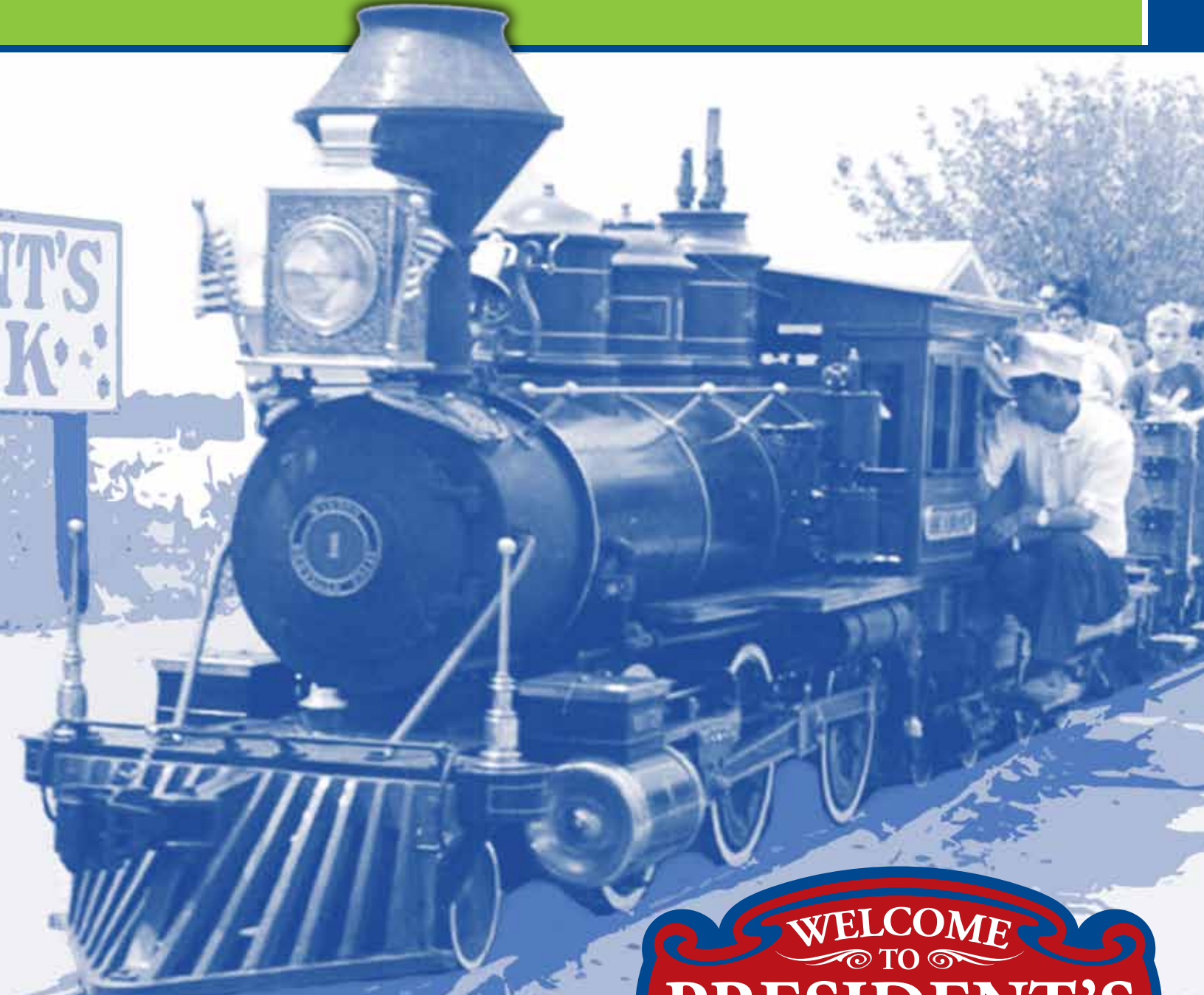


FOCUS

ON CARLSBAD

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TAKING A LOOK BACK

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Carlsbad Amusement Needed Oil, Coke, and a Wooden Horse

by JOHN SAFIN

Sherman, please set the Way-Back Machine for the late 1960s. For those of you under the age of 40, we'll jump into the hot tub time machine and splash into the past. Walt Disney World was about to open in Orlando, Florida. The Disney Company was already the talk of the country with their 1955 opening of Disneyland in California. It became obvious to several people in Southeastern New Mexico that it was time for Carlsbad to get its own amusement park.

Robert O. Anderson was an oilman who knew his business, how to do business, and wanted to help his community. He lived in Roswell with connections that extended throughout New Mexico and across the nation. It might help to know he merged his oil company, Atlantic Refining, with Richfield Oil, creating ARCO--better known in the western states as AM/PM convenience stores.

Meanwhile in Carlsbad, the Coca-Cola Bottling Company was in operation. This was when Coke put real sugar in the soda, the soda into a glass bottle, and a bottle opener was needed to get the cap off (unless you were a tough guy who could open it with his teeth). Pete Pelletier ran the bottling plant and wanted to have Coca-Cola more involved in the community. Soon, Anderson and Pelletier joined with other people and started the process of building an amusement area in Carlsbad.

"The beach was used more often for swimming back then," said Jed Howard, President of the Southeastern New Mexico Historical Society. "There

weren't as many private swimming pools in Carlsbad. The beach then was good because the river water would flow faster and kept the water cleaner." Because the beach area had some activity, it made sense to find a suitable location along the Pecos River for the amusement park. "

Anderson put some money into the President's Park, got his family to run it, and revitalized the area to go with the times." The Pecos River would even become part of the amusement park with paddleboat rides on the George Washington. The boat was purchased out of state and brought to Carlsbad around 1969.

"There was also a train for everyone to ride. It was a 1/5th scale model that was a live steam engine called "Abe Lincoln," Jed recalled. "The track would loop up to what is now Riverbend near the trestle bridge and down to about where the fountain is now."

The 2-mile trip train ride, partnered with the George Washington boat ride,

gave visitors a chance for a relaxing tour of Lake Carlsbad. For those with a need for speed, there were other rides that would let the wind blow through your hair.

Leslie Aragon worked at President's Park when she was a teenager. "I remember the train was an 'older person's job' for Kelly and Jeff, who were both around 22 years old. I was 17 years old when I worked there, so I operated the kiddie rides; the mini-Ferris wheel, the airplane ride, the little cars that went in a circle."

She remembered the big Ferris wheel, bumper cars, tilt-a-whirl, and the carousel. "The carousel was really special." Leslie was very much correct about the uniqueness of the carousel as it was crafted by the Dentzel family.

Gustav Dentzel emigrated from Germany to the United States in the late 1800s and is considered the father of the modern merry-go-round. In the late 1970s, Anderson bought the Dentzel carousel, brought it to Carlsbad, repaired, and refurbished it. The bridge crossing Lake Carlsbad was farther north than the current walking bridge. Once on the other side, there were more attractions, including a ride on the carousel in the big, round room in the building that is now the Pecos River Village Convention Center. No

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JED HOWARD

Pictured Below, from left, are Walter Gerrells, Julie Nixon Eisenhower, and Peter Pelletier.

PRESIDENT



WELCOME TO PRESIDENT'S PARK CARLSBAD NEW MEXICO

surprise that section of the convention center is called the "Carousel Room."

When asked what she liked best about working at the park, Leslie said it was very fun. "Parents would bring their kids and grandparents brought their grandchildren. No one stayed grumpy whenever they came to the park. All my friends worked, too. I was outside in the great weather."

One of the perks of working at the park was getting on the rides for free. Leslie briefly commented about riding the giant, spinning swing with her friend Yvonne more than they should have. She stopped telling the story at this point.

Speaking of overindulging, Jed recalled McDonald's had a restaurant at the park for a couple years. Several other people remember there was a McDonald's, but no one could remember when it opened or how long it was actually open. Leslie added, "There was an ice cream parlor and a booth that sold hamburgers, french fries, corn dogs, and other fried foods."

Sadly, all good things must come to an end. The park began having financial troubles in the 1980s. Attendance slowed with the changing dynamic of the community (fewer children), tourist activity in the area slowed, the state of the economy was shaky, and the price of gasoline jumped to \$1.30 a gallon. Anderson sold the park to Bob Light in

1984. A few years later, the City of Carlsbad bought the park with plans to continue operating it. The amount of repair and maintenance, plus the liability cost, was simply too much. The rides were sold, donated, or otherwise disposed. The Dentzel carousel was sold to someone in Oklahoma.

Today, while Carlsbad residents and visitors enjoy the lake, pieces of President's Park are visible. The beach house on the raised area of the municipal park was the ticket booth, and some footings for the rides look like little monuments dotting the grassy areas. In the spirit of President's Park, both sides of Lake Carlsbad continue to be an attraction.

"The Pecos River Village is still used today and the convention center has rooms available for any type of meeting or event," said Brenda Whiteaker, Director of Operations for the Carlsbad Chamber of Commerce. "The village has a working kitchen if someone has a wedding, an anniversary party, or other event at the convention center. Of course, the entire village is open for Christmas on the Pecos tours."

Bordering the convention center on the north is Lake Carlsbad Municipal Golf Course. This public venue has a nine-hole and an 18-hole course on the east side of Lake Carlsbad. South of the convention center is the Riverwalk Recreation Complex and Project Playground. On the opposite bank, Lake Carlsbad Municipal Tennis Complex is open free to the public. Adjacent to the tennis courts is the Cascades at Carlsbad, a soon-to-be-developed outdoor village marketplace.

Of course, there are six miles of grassy playground area with picnic tables and the beach is still a great place to go swimming. The George Washington is still operated today by Carlsbad Cruise Lines, and one of the boats is used by the Christmas on the Pecos tour. Remember to ask the captain how she survived floods, a few incidents of sinking, and the bullet holes on the command bridge.

Whether you're nostalgic for the past or looking toward the future, the area once known as President's Park remains a great place to have family fun.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:
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PRESIDENT'S PARK: THEN



AND NOW

