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Destination: Tracking Down Our Classic Roller Coasters

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By the turn of the 20th century, visitors to Connecticut's parks expected more than patches of grass—they craved a whiz-bang medley of games, shows, and rides. Consequently, amusement parks, for a spell, became as dominant a part of the landscape as church steeples and brick mills.

In the early 1900s, Connecticut boasted nearly one amusement park for every three towns, according to *A Century of Fun: Pictorial History of New England Amusement Parks* (Midway Museum Publications, 1993). And unlike in many other states, it was fairly simple and quick for residents to get to most of them, since the parks were seamlessly linked by a 1,100-mile network of trolley tracks run by, at one point, 19 different companies. That was no coincidence. Trolley providers built most of Connecticut's amusement parks as a profit-minded way to keep people riding the rails on weekends. Indeed, they located the parks at the end of their lines, which might have required paying multi-zone fares to reach.

Inside the parks, star attractions were tracks of a different sort: roller coasters. For less than a dime, a rider could enjoy gut-wrenching plummets from steep, sinewy tracks, initially made of wood and, later, of steel.

What's become of Connecticut's great coasters? Though a few survive, the rest were claimed by natural disasters and economic downturns.

Fires destroyed many, including the saucer-shaped ride called the Sky Rocket at Bridgeport's Steeplechase Island. Others, like the white beachfront BIG DIPPER at Norwalk's Roton Point Amusement Park, were blasted apart by the infamous hurricane of September 21, 1938. All that remains at Roton Point is the coaster's boarding platform, which today serves as an oddly tall cabana. And the Great Depression, sapping household budgets for leisure-time pursuits, spelled the end for other coasters, such as the Frolic at Hartford's Capitol Park.

Though today preservationists and coaster enthusiasts revere historic roller coasters, mid-20th-century proprietors viewed them as dispensable commodities. For instance, when the Greyhound, a coaster that from 1923 to 1938 (when it, too, was destroyed by the big hurricane) looped from East Broadway to Monroe Street at Milford's Walnut Beach Amusement Park ceased to earn its keep, it was dismantled. Its wood was recycled as wallboards at a local country club's banquet hall (which has itself since burned down), according to Eleanor Benifico, an author of *Sand in our Shoes: A Narrative and Pictorial History of Walnut Beach/Myrtle Beach Milford Connecticut* (Walnut Beach-Myrtle

Beach Historical Association, 2004). The wooden coaster at Waterbury's Lakewood Park, which featured an impressive 2,000 feet of track undulating like a sine wave across hilly terrain, dodged demolition. In 1935, after back-to-back money-losing seasons, it was relocated to Canobie Lake Park, in Salem, New Hampshire, where it still rattles and clacks today.

Despite their one-time glory, only slight traces remain of the eight coasters that once loomed over Savin Rock, West Haven's legendary mid-20th-century Coney Island-cum-Las Vegas. Of the park's Thunderbolt coaster, whose 5,000 feet of track were suspended over Long Island Sound on a pier, Martin Goorhigan, a Connecticut resident interviewed by sixth-grade students at West Haven's Thompson School in 1988 recalled: "(S)lowly the trains slid down the first ramp where they caught the chains and then gently crept up the first incline, the chains straining mightily and now, after reaching the apex of the incline, without warning, the trains, released from the chains of bondage, careened with the fury of a giant tornado toward the earth." Today all that's left of the Thunderbolt is the 20-foot flagpole that soared from the coaster's 92-foot summit; it's preserved in the nearby Savin Rock Museum. The pier's skeletal pilings can still be seen near Oak Street, locals say, but only after severe winter storms erode the sand around them.

Fortunately, several historic coasters have survived the ages. The most famous, perhaps, is now also the oldest. The Wildcat debuted in 1927 at Lake Compounce, the oldest continuously operating amusement park in North America, located on the Bristol-Southington line. (The Wildcat replaced the 1914 Green Dragon, the park's first electric-powered coaster.) With a 68-foot initial drop, which accounts for most of the coaster's 85-foot elevation, the Wildcat hurls two three-car-long trains at speeds of 48 miles per hour across 2,746 feet of wooden track, which take about 90 seconds to traverse, says Tracey Blackman, the park's spokeswoman.

Among coaster connoisseurs, a Wildcat ride is considered a classic. It was designed by Herbert Schmeck of Philadelphia Toboggan Coasters, based in Hatfield, Pennsylvania, a company that has built 147 coasters since its founding in 1904. Sections of the Wildcat's tracks that seem squeezed perilously close together are a Schmeck trademark. "There were people who would come to the park just to see how many times they could go on the Wildcat in a row," said Andrea Kapchensky, who ripped tickets, ran games, and waitressed in the park for 10 seasons in the 1960s. The park's Boulder Dash, with 4,672 feet of track and a 115-foot drop, may be more menacing, but it's a relative baby, having been built in 2000.

The two coasters at Middlebury's Quassy Amusement Park, though younger, are unequivocally vintage. The steel Mad Mouse is, according to Quassy spokesman Ron Gustafson, one of the only three still-functioning "Monster" coasters manufactured by the Allan Herschell Company, best known for its carousels. Built in 1960 for Playland in Rye, New York, the 30-foot Mad Mouse is unusual for featuring individual two-passenger cars instead of trains.

Points for longevity also go to Quassy's Little Dipper, another Herschell Company creation. Erected at Quassy in 1952, it's one of the country's oldest-operating steel coasters, Gustafson says. Topping out at just 12 feet, the Dipper appeals mainly to children, who climb aboard its blue-and-gold trains for a few whirls around a 220-foot-long oval track. "These are more family coasters," Gustafson said, "since parents aren't scared to go on them."

If You Go

Lake Compounce, 822 Lake Avenue, Bristol; www.lakecompounce.com; (860) 583-3300; open May to October

Quassy Amusement Park, 2132 Middlebury Road, Middlebury; www.quassy.com; (203) 758-2913; open late April to late September

Canobie Lake Park, 85 North Policy Street, Salem, New Hampshire. www.canobie.com; (603) 893-3506; open May to October

Savin Rock Museum, 6 Rock Street, West Haven; www.savinrockmuseum.com; (203) 937-3666; open April to December