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HANSON'S AMUSEMENT PARK

I. The Early Years 1891-1909

In earlier years railroads and trolley companies stimulated passenger traffic by constructing parks at scenic areas along the rail lines. After the Lehigh Valley Railroad purchased the Harvey's Lake and Wilkes-Barre Railroad in 1887, it planned to develop a major resort along the lakeshore. In November 1889 several tracts of land between Alderson and Barnum Place were purchased by the railroad in order to construct the Harvey's Lake Picnic Grounds.

By early June 1891 the Lehigh Valley Railroad was preparing to open its splendid new park at the Lake. Well-shaded and ideally located, the major attraction of the park was the 150 foot dance pavilion, the largest in the region. On June 9, 1891, twenty train cars, run in three sections, transported the Odd Fellows from Wilkes-Barre and Pittston for the first major picnic at the new park. William Bond had launched his *Big Boat*, the new seventy foot steamer, a few weeks earlier and he was ready for the event.

On the lakeshore at the new Picnic Grounds the railroad built an immense L-shaped dock. It was 180 feet long with a ninety foot arm. The dock would accommodate Bond's *Big Boat*, his smaller *City Charter* and the *Mistletoe*, a small steamer owned by the Rhoads Hotel. Bathing houses were also constructed at this time along the park's shoreline.

The Harvey's Lake Picnic Grounds was an immediate success. Additional features for the following year were planned. By May 1892 the dance pavilion was being prepared for another season's use. C. F. Cook, the Wilkes-Barre photographer, opened a gallery at the Picnic Grounds in June. The steamer dock, which was moved several feet by the winter ice, was repaired, but plans by the railroad to construct a large hotel at the park grounds for the 1892 season were never completed.

For a decade the Picnic Grounds served as a popular park for families to gather for picnics and for couples to stroll along the lake shore. In 1903 the park grounds were still primarily shaded areas with picnic tables. A Merry-Go-Round was operating at the park, but the only other amusement device at this time was a crude bowling alley. The railroad line from Alderson ran along the lakeshore and turned into the park to leave passengers at the small Harvey's Lake substation, which was located behind the dance pavilion. Passenger cars chartered for picnic excursions would layover on a side track at the park for the day. W. F. Clark now held the photograph gallery in the front of the park at Noxen Road.

For the 1906 season the Lehigh Valley "Railroad leased the park to John A. Redington, who also owned the Redington Hotel in Wilkes-Barre. But late in the same year, on December 12, 1906, the dance pavilion was lost to fire along with the original carousel that had been stored inside the pavilion for the winter. The park then leased a lot along the Noxen Road toward the rear of the park to H. F. Seibert for a small Merry-Go-Round, and a new dance pavilion was constructed at the site of the old one.

II. Creating An Amusement Park 1908-1934

Conversion of the Picnic Grounds to an amusement park began in the summer of 1908.

Large picnic excursions were arriving at the grounds on a daily basis. In this year an arcade with "moving picture" machines was added and a Ferris Wheel was constructed. On July 4, 1910, the record-breaking crowd at the Picnic Grounds bought 15,000 tickets to the new figure-eight Coaster owned by Charles Shelley. The Roller Coaster ran single cars, each carrying four to six passengers. The Coaster had its own organ for musical accompaniment. The Miniature Railroad owned by Fred Thomas was also added to the park. The steam operated train, an exact replica of a steam locomotive, was built in Tonawanda, New York. The operator sat on the tender car and pulled two passenger coaches.

The Lake was cresting as a major resort in 1910. There were daily train excursions planned for all of July and August. In addition to the park amusements, hundreds would crowd the park beach. Boating parties were common as tourists could take steamboat rides or sightseeing launches around the Lake.

When Charles Shelley built the Coaster, he also built the Shoot-the-Chute, an enormous attraction. The Shoot-the-Chute was about sixty feet high and was built along the water's edge, next to the steamboat landing. The wooden slide had rows of small rollers down the entire length of the long chute. Single, double or triple sleds were rented by the hour. The sleds were taken up a long ramp and three flights of stairs to the top of the Shoot-the-Chute. With elbows and legs tucked in and hands gripping the rope, youths raced the sleds down the Chute finishing with a grand splash into the Lake.

In the spring of 1915 a new steam operated Merry-Go-Round was added to the Picnic Grounds. The Merry-Go-Round, with forty-four wooden horses and two chariots, lasted until the park closed. In April 1916 the Lehigh Valley Railroad renewed the park lease with Redington for fifteen years. As with earlier leases, the railroad reserved its track line through the park, and sale of liquor in the park was prohibited, a condition frequently violated by transient and unlicensed salesmen. Redington was assisted in the management of the park by Charles Lee and George Heller. In July 1921 the old restaurant was removed and a new enclosed restaurant was constructed by George H. Jenkins. The restaurant was managed by Alfred Wintersteen; the second floor was a dance area. On July 4, 1921, the ten-piece MacLuskie's Orchestra provided afternoon and evening dance music for the opening of the new dance pavilion.

Redington, Lee, Heller, and Wintersteen planned to purchase the park from the railroad, and in anticipation of the sale, the four men created the Harvey's Lake Park Company in 1922. On July 5, 1923, however, the railroad sold the park directly to Redington who, in turn, leased the park to the new corporation. Other transactions over operation of the park would follow. The park corporation subleased the park to Redington and Lee. In October 1923 Redington and Lee, in turn, leased the park to Alfred Wintersteen for fifteen years. Harvey's Lake Park totaled twenty-five acres.

Wintersteen converted the dance pavilion behind the restaurant into the Dodgem ride. Nettie Wintersteen managed the Dodgem ride and assisted her husband, Alfred Wintersteen, in the management of the park. For years the beach was supervised by Howard Major who also managed the Shoot-the-Chute, which had been acquired by the park owners from Shelley. The Noxen Road was also an area growing with attractions.

Irwin A. Rood, the West Corner grocer, had a ten-pin alley and game stands on the park side of the Noxen Road until 1933. In May 1930 the lease with Wintersteen was merged into a sale of the park to Nettie Wintersteen since her husband, Alfred Wintersteen, had become disabled. In 1929 John E. Hanson had joined Nettie Wintersteen in the management of the park, and when the May 1930 sale to Wintersteen was arranged, Wintersteen sold a one-half interest in the park to Hanson.

In the spring of 1931, the sixty-five foot high Roller Coaster was built by John A. Miller and Oscar E. Bittler at a cost of \$10,825.00. The Roller Coaster was built over the Lehigh Valley rail line which turned from the lake's shoreline and passed through the Picnic Grounds. The *Speed Hound*, the name of the Roller Coaster, was not generally used, although the coaster itself enjoyed great popularity.

Electric lighting was not in general use at the lake until 1927, when Hanson arranged to light the park for late evening use, especially for graduation parties after the new Roller Coaster was built. The Merry-Go-Round was also converted to electric operation.

Redington had retained ownership of the bathing beach and bathhouses in the May 1930 sale to Nettie Wintersteen. Still, Wintersteen and Hanson promoted beach attractions as much as the park and amusements. The Picnic Grounds helped to promote annual boat races, usually in a triangular two and one-half mile course around the Lake, with the Picnic Grounds as a favorite viewing point. For a time Alex, a tame bear, delighted the crowds as he wrestled the local talent. The bear was originally owned by Ralph A. Davis, who later raffled the bear to Emory Newell of Noxen.

At the intersection of the lake road and Noxen Road Charles Lord's was also a popular roadside stop and in one weekend at this time he sold 1,500 hot dogs. The largest

picnic of the season was always the Coxtton Yards Welfare Association, whose annual excursions to the Lake began in 1925. In 1933 the Coxtton Yards excursion brought thirty train cars of guests to the Lake. To close the 1933 season the Picnic Grounds offered its first Children's Day in mid-September and 15, 000 children were offered free rides and refreshments.

In May 1934 Redington agreed to sell the beach to Wintersteen and Hanson. For the 1934 season the owners assumed direct control of the bathing area; Howard Major moved to a corner of the beach next to Lord's restaurant where he rented canoes and rowboats for another two decades. At the time of the sale, the beach had two hundred feet of boardwalk in the water and a forty-foot high diving platform. There was no admission charge to the beach, although there was a small charge for use of the bathhouses. In late June 1934 one of the Lake's most tragic drownings occurred at the Picnic Grounds. Joseph Bradbury, who was twenty years old, arrived from Luzerne with his family. He had constructed a diving helmet from a hot-water heater. Glass was inserted for viewing and a garden hose was extended from the helmet for breathing. However, Bradbury made the mistake of tying a thirty-five pound stone to himself for the dive into the Lake. The apparatus failed and Bradbury was unable to lift himself to the surface. After Bradbury was underwater for seven minutes, George Lutz, Sidney Ganaposki, and Elwood Davis, lifeguards at the beach, tried to rescue him, but it was too late.

III. Hanson's Park 1935-1984

By March 1935 Alfred Wintersteen had died, and Nettie Wintersteen sold her one-half

interest in the park to John Hanson. However, the Wintersteen family retained ownership of the Merry-Go-Round and the Dodgem ride.

Swimming races were popular at the Lake during the late 1930's. The races were usually sponsored by the Wyoming Valley Swimming Association and the WPA Recreation League, and the swimmers qualified for Amateur Athletic Association championship meets. A three-mile triangular course began at the Picnic Grounds. After a one hundred yard swim into the Lake there was a right turn at a buoy for the long leg to Sandy Beach, then a turn at another buoy back to the Picnic Grounds. Two circuits around the course were needed to complete the two-mile distance. In 1938 the Mid-Atlantic AAU long-distance champions were the local team of Irving Roe, Jim Campbell and Elwood "Woody" Davis. They had won the title in the five-mile Lake Ariel championships a year earlier. Other strong competitors from the area at the Lake races were Bob Jackson, Charles Stitzer and Andy Tryka. The national AAU long-distance swimming championships were held at the Lake on July 29, 1939. The five-mile course began at the Picnic Grounds and ten laps were required around a long course in the Lake. Well-known Wyoming Valley swimmers in the event were James Campbell and Michael Cavanaugh, but the individual championship was won by Steve Wosniak of Buffalo, New York.

Near the end of the decade the Shoot-the-Chute, in disrepair, was removed from the beach. To replace the Chute attraction, Hanson introduced Hackercraft speedboat rides in 1938. A second speedboat was soon added. Several years later four twenty-two foot Chris-Craft speedboats offered a thrilling summer ride around the Lake. The well-remembered speedboats were named after the Hanson grandchildren: Bruce, Corry,

Danny and Donnie Lee. The speedboats were based at the bathhouse and weekend crowds would line the dock for tickets .

There were a number of changes to the park in later years as new rides were placed in the park by concession owners. In 1944 Orville Walton added the Whip to the park, and two years later he built a new Miniature Railway. In 1946 the small Roller Coaster was dismantled and Walton built the Twirler in its place. In the same year J. L. Garrahan added a small Ferris Wheel to the park. In 1947 the Flying Scooter ride was added to the park by Michael H. Yozviak and James V. O'Donnell.

In time, however, Hanson would acquire direct ownership of the new rides. After World War II the drive-in theatre was a new attraction. Hanson's Drive-In was built in the rear of the park in June 1948 but it operated only three years. Hanson's innovations also included a special section for young children which opened in 1950. Kiddie- Land included a number of mechanical rides, for example, small boats, fire engines, pony carts, and a miniature whip. There was also the Starlight Express, a small children's roller coaster which ran for nineteen years.

Since the 1935 sale of the park, members of the Wintersteen family operated the Merry-Go-Round and Dodgem. Until 1959 the rides were operated by Genevieve Wintersteen Fisk and her husband, Harold Fisk. Harold was a popular figure at the "brake" of the Merry-Go-Round; his father, Sidney Fisk, skirted the apron helping the children astride the horses and extending well-wishes to the riders. In later years, Robert Wintersteen, well known for his civic services to the Lake community, managed the two rides, which later were operated by his wife, Mary Ann Wintersteen.

For three decades Hanson's was a favorite park for the youth of the Back Mountain and

Wyoming Valley. The forty foot diving platform challenged young braggarts and, of course, there was considerable youthful betting as to which of Hanson's speedboats was actually the fastest. The Coaster never failed to surprise even the most seasoned rider. The cars, jammed with gleeful youths, were slowly cranked to the top of the Coaster. At the top, the large blue Lake would wondrously appear. Then suddenly the cars would turn away and plummet down the Coaster's huge dip as the riders' screams drowned out the thumping musical tunes of the Merry-Go-Round. There was an immediate second, but smaller dip, a quick rise to the top at the far end of the Coaster, and then a neck twisting hard left turn and drop through a series of smaller dips, all to the countless clack-clack clacking song of the Coaster cars as they raced along the thrilling track. With an unexpected suddenness the Coaster cars were swiftly braked at the end of the run in view of an anxious crowd waiting on the platform. Night rides on the Coaster were especially enjoyable. The park would be awash in colored lights with the Merry-Go-Round in the center of the park filling the summer nights with its banging music. From the Coaster indistinct sounds could be heard from the Bingo stand below as the cars crested for a brief view of the dark waters encircled by lights and the glow of Sunset on the far end of the Lake. Then the Coaster would crash away pulling the breathless riders through a ribbon of lights along its winding course.

For young children the Merry-Go-Round was the center of attraction. The youngest children, held by reassuring parents, were usually seated on a colorful, stationary stallion; more experienced youngsters rushed for a favorite jumping horse. If all the horses were filled, kids would usually step off to wait for the next ride rather than sit on one of the carousel's ornamental carriages, which were reserved for "old ladies." The

outside ring of horses were favored for the opportunity to juggle an outstretched hand for the brass ring. Merry-Go-Round riders can always remember a youthful fascination with the booming brassy machinery in the center of the carousel as images hypnotically passed through the circle of mirrors above the organ.

In the years before the video games the Penny Arcade was lined with fascinating mechanical gadgets that tested the skills of small, youthful hands; the little pocket prizes have long disappeared from memory. A miniature gypsy in a glass case would drop the future down a narrow slot; in another case the mechanical shovel always dropped the best prize before it could be swung over to the chute. The shooting gallery games were slightly out of reach; a youngster teetered on tiptoes to aim a rifle at the jungle animals or gangsters that popped in view. For many years -a penny would bring a picture card of a movie star or western hero. In time, the arcade cards of the silent movie heroes, William S. Hart and "Bronco" Bill Anderson, were replaced for another generation by Tim McCoy and Buck Jones, until they, too, were eclipsed by Roy Rogers and Rex Allen. In later years, every boy wanted the elusive card of Lash LaRue, a curious cowboy anti-hero in black who fascinated a generation of "front row kids" before the Korean War. Of course, it took a brave youngster to gamble a penny for a card from the glass-paneled catalogue of burlesque queens. Then, too, there was the frightening challenge among friends over the "grip tester." For others the manly test was to evade the parental eye and to play the forbidden pinball machines.

There was usually one attraction which offered everyone an unusual chance, through luck or skill to plot some harmless damage. The only penalty was the long line at the Dodgem. But a ticket only allowed a precious few minutes on the electric cars, and

soon the floor would be cleared. When the attendant dropped the chain, a torrent of kids charged the rubber-ringed cars. There was only one way to really grab a car: run to the far end of the pavilion and slide the last few feet along the metal floor, fling a hand on the back of the seat, grab the wheel with the other hand, and jump in with a smug furtive glance at a favorite girl before eyeing the competition. When the bell rang, the cars would begin to swirl into a raucous mass of innocent menace. There were two theories about building speed as quickly as possible: some kept the accelerator "floored," but others "pumped" the cars to full speed; it usually took half a circle to really move the cars along, and woe to the early cars hopelessly driven into a corner where an uncertain novice could be continually knocked into spins by the circling horde. Amid the bumpy fleeting laughter of the Dodgem ride, children could joyfully inflict painless aggression on nameless strangers, who were usually too busy planning their next crashing challenge to chase the annoyances of more amateur drivers. The Dodgem ride was always too short; it always seemed longer waiting in line for a crack at the wondrous cars.

The last major picnic excursions to the Picnic Grounds were sponsored by Coxtown Yards, a railroad assembly connected with the Lehigh Valley Railroad. But the last Coxtown excursions ended in the late 1940s. A few other excursions followed in the early 1950s; for example, the Pittston area Sunday Schools held a train excursion to the park on July 7, 1951.

Park ownership descended to John and Shirley Hanson. Three decades after the "dance band" era had entranced the Nation, a new musical craze, rock and roll, breathed new life in the Lake's amusement centers. Local musical talent, providing

weekend retreats for teenage crowds, were stationed at area parks Including Hanson's Amusement Park. From the early 1960's to the early 1979's, dances featuring local and national talent were regularly held in the second-floor dance hall above the restaurant. A weekend dance at Hanson's could draw two thousand people to enjoy emerging national talent which included Chubby Checker, Bobby Goldsboro, the Supremes, and Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons. The dark hall, built to serve the musical dreams of much earlier youth, jumped to the energetic beat of a stimulating but uncertain generation, many of whom lost themselves to the wonderfully deafening music. Hanson's dances were able to draw considerable local talent from the Wyoming Valley; the most popular area attractions were Joe Nardone and the All Stars, and Eddie Day with both the Starfires and TNT. For another generation, Hanson's Amusement Park continued to attract young families to the grounds during weekends, but the week-day crowds of an earlier time were ending at area parks. In time, beaches everywhere at the Lake drew fewer bathers as other diversions .attracted Wyoming Valley residents. Hanson's speedboats were eventually replaced by pontoon boats and as the expansive dock system was gradually lost to ice damage the large docks were not replaced.

IV. Auction and Aftermath

Rising insurance costs, the loss of the Roller Coaster, theme park creations elsewhere, and changing public tastes in entertainment doomed most local amusement parks.

Other county amusement parks, Sans Souci, Angela Park and Rocky Glen closed.

In its last years the Merry-Go-Round, the Pretzel Ride, the Whip, and Flying Coaster still served the park. The Kiddie-Land introduced wide-eyed youngsters to the magic of

amusement rides. But the Lake's public beaches closed and lingered last at Hanson's until at Hanson's the beachfront was converted into boat slip rentals. Finally, it was also time to close the amusement park.

On Wednesday, September 26, 1984, at 1:00 P.M., Don Hanson's Amusement Park was auctioned. The sale was handled by Norton Auctioneers, Cold Water, Michigan, a nationally known amusement park auction service. During the weeks before the sale, small crowds enjoyed their last rides and photographed their children on the Merry-Go-Round. A few of the Hanson rides have remained intact elsewhere. For example, the sixty-foot long train, with its four-cylinder Ford gasoline engine cab and three coaches, built in 1948 by the Bittler company of Elmira, New York, is now the Bonneville-Pine Creek Railroad, at Register (near Benton), Pennsylvania, and sometimes operates between the Bonham Nursing Home and Memorial Park. The Merry-Go-Round, separately owned by the Wintersteen family, and not included in the auction sale, was leased in 1987 to Old Town, a park in Kissimmee, Florida, where it delights a new generation of youngsters.

A few dances were held in the late 1980s with the RPM "Old Star" 50's Band, Joe Nardone and Billy Brown (formerly the All Stars), and Eddie Day and the Dayettes. In the summer of 1989, however, the Coaster, left mute since 1980, was dismantled.

In May 1992 the 4,000 seat Bud Light Amphitheater opened at Hanson's Park with a May 25 performance by Kenny Loggins and other musical guests. During this time Joe Nardone's All Stars and Eddie Day returned for reunion dances at Hanson's dance hall above the restaurant - ventures which were very successful. The amphitheater had a five year run with many national musical stars at the Lake.

After 1996 the park grounds have been leased for camping opportunities and for boat rentals. The grand splash from the Chute into the Lake, the musical boom of the Merry-Go-Round, the clapping of the Roller Coaster track, the spark of the Dodgem - all memories of another time.

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