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THAT ONCE THRILLED
LONG ISLANDERS **B2**

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Lost to **TIME**, but never

Rockaways' Playland in Queens entertained families from the early 1900s to the 1980s.

NEWSDAY / BARRY WONG

Looking back at three amusement parks that were once only a car ride away



Freedomland U.S.A. in the Bronx produced historic experiences that included a bandit eyeing a shot during a ride through the Old West.

BY FRANK LOVECE
Special to Newsday

They took us to new heights and they took us back in time. They took us places unimagined in a country called childhood. Today we might bring our families to Adventureland in Farmingdale, or Luna Park in Coney Island. But it was our turn years ago to be kids and teens. And a pair of long-gone amusement parks and one short-lived theme park — they were ours.

Two were in New York City: Rockaways' Playland, in Rockaway Beach, Queens, and the American-history theme park Freedom-

land U.S.A., in the Bronx. The other sat across the Hudson River in New Jersey, bestriding the towns of Cliffside Park and Fort Lee: Palisades Amusement Park.

They rose and fell, the beneficiary of and the victims of their times. Generations of us knew of the “secret” broken fence that let kids into Palisades for free. We fought the Great Chicago Fire at Freedomland, and strapped into the astronaut-themed Out of This World during the 1960s Space Age at Playland. They're all gone, these electric mini cities that lit up the night, and our childhoods.

Yet in the merry-go-round of memory, they all live on.

MEMORY

FREEDOMLAND U.S.A.

Completed in 1960 on the current site of Co-op City by former Disneyland executive C.V. Wood, this “Disneyland of the East” was shaped like the continental United States, the better to imprint the idea of our nation’s history — or at least the midcentury version — onto kids and their families.

Tracing American manifest destiny east to west across 205 acres with more than 8 miles of navigable waterways, the park featured such attractions as Little Old New York, Northwest Fur Trappers, Great Chicago Fire, Civil War and Fort Cavalry, among others — plus Satellite City, its tomorrowland version of Cape Canaveral. You could ride stagecoaches across the Great Plains, sternwheel steamships upon the Great Lakes, and the Santa Fe Railroad to San Francisco. Major musical acts played the Moon Bowl stage.

“Freedomland was unique — an American history theme park,” said Syosset’s Mike Virgintino, 67, author of “Freedomland U.S.A.: The Definitive History” (2018) and a lecturer on the topic, who lived nearby as a child. “As a kid it got me interested in American history,” in particular through the Civil War attraction.

“You rode in a correspondents’ wagon,” as used by real-life newspaper reporters of the 1860s, “pulled by a couple of horses,” recalled the retired broadcasting and public relations professional. “You’d see the Union camp and the Confederate camp. And as you went into the battlefield, you would see fire burst out of a cannon muzzle or flame burst out of a rifle, and you would hear the sound effects of that. It was the beginning of audio-animatronics” — robot-like figures with sound — “that Disneyland became popular for, because a lot of the early people who were involved in the creation of Freedomland came from Disney,” he said.

One child who visited the park, Baldwin’s Bill Cotter, actually grew up to become a Disney “Imagineer,” and applied a Freedomland lesson to his adult occupation.

“My favorite thing at Freedomland was the Civil War,” the 72-year-old said. “Cannons blasted, [artificial] trees fell down, [animatronic] horses



Cable cars pass above the history-themed attractions at Freedomland U.S.A., where Co-Op City is located today in the Bronx.

dropped down dead — but if you sat in the back of the wagon, like my brother Jim and I did, and looked behind it, all of a sudden a tree would stand back up, a horse would stand back up. We thought that was so cool, seeing something you’re really not supposed to see.”

That stuck with him. “In my time at Disney I would say, ‘Do you want the guy in the back of the wagon to see the image get broken? No. We have to make sure we time it well enough that what we’re doing here is out of sight. You can’t break that image.’”

Retired artist-designer Billy Collins, 78, who grew up in Malverne and now lives in Tustin, California, worked at Freedomland as an Old West cowboy. He had been assisting a relative who was one of the park photographers. “Then I met the cowboys and we hit it off so I joined up with them,” he said, even though “I was 15 and lying that I was 16,” the minimum age to work there.

“They taught me the tricks of the trade, like how to take a fall without getting hurt” during shootouts, he recalled. And though he worked seven days a week, eight to 10 hours a day, he said, he loved it. Plus, “We got to eat for free.”

For numerous reasons includ-

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ON THE COVER Triplets Charles, Joseph and Mike Mauer ride The Whip in 1951 at Palisades Amusement Park in Palisades Park, New Jersey.

A vintage ride through nearby amusement parks

PARKS from B3

ing chronic financial issues, Freedomland U.S.A. closed at 11 p.m., Sunday, Sept. 13, 1964, and filed for bankruptcy almost immediately. In the early 1990s, Cotter, then at Warner Bros., spoke with Wood, then head of the studio's Recreational Entertainment Division, about Freedomland's demise.

"He said he had done successful parks in other places and that New York just humbled him," Cotter recalled. "He said he didn't count on New York weather being as severe as it was, that you could not operate the park during winter. . . . He said, 'I'm open four months of the year and I'm paying property taxes for 12.'" Wood also disliked working with labor unions and really disliked having to pay protection money to the mobsters so prevalent around many local businesses of the time.

ROCKAWAYS' PLAYLAND

It was founded at the turn of the 20th century as the L.A. Thompson Amusement Park, by roller-coaster pioneer LaMarcus Adna Thompson, of Glen Cove, and became Rockaways' Playland under new ownership in 1928.

Located on Rockaway Beach Boulevard in Queens, between Beach 97th and Beach 98th Streets, it was home to the 1930s wooden roller coaster the Atom Smasher, immortalized in the 1952 nonfiction gimmick film "This Is Cinerama." Other well-remembered rides include the Whip, the Calypso and the H-Bomb Rocket; the spook-house-style "dark ride" Out of This World; and the Wacky Shack, "4 Rooms Filled with Fun," among other rides and attractions.

"We had relatives still living in Brooklyn," Cotter recalled, "and if we were going to Flatbush to visit them, we could pop over to Rockaways' Playland." His 10-year-old self, he said, "really enjoyed it."

While Playland charged no admission, "You had to pay for the rides, you had to pay for all the carnival games, and with three of us kids in the family, it became expensive," Cotter recalled. "My folks felt Freedomland was more of an all-day experience" and worth the price of admission and of ticket booklets for the ostensibly educational attractions.

Still, Playland was affordable



Sister Patrick Joseph swings the hammer during a New York City Police Anchor Club outing at Palisades Amusement Park.

enough to last eight decades, and it helped make the neighborhood special for those living there. Retired postal worker Joseph Priestley, 76, who later grew up in Hempstead and now lives in Greensboro, North Carolina, attended St. Camillus Catholic Academy on Beach 99th Street. To this day he remembers how "we

could see the maintenance people working on the roller coaster from our second-floor classroom in the spring" — a sure sign of summer.

Closing in 1985 and demolished later that decade, Playland left behind a vacant lot for many years until a housing development sprang up in 2003. But the sign on the station

platform for the nearby el still reads: "B 98 St-Playland."

PALISADES AMUSEMENT PARK

No one of a certain place and a certain time can ever forget that TV and radio jingle: "PALISADES has the rides / PALISADES has the fun / Commmmme onnnnn over / Shows and DANcing are



Some kids circumvented the Palisades entrance using a "secret" hole in the fence.



Children enjoy speeding along the track on the H-Bomb Rocket ride in 1955 at Rockaways' Playland in Rockaway Beach.

free / So's the PARKing, so, gee / Commmmm onnnnn over . . . Palisades Amusement Park / Swings all day and after dark . . ."

"They had a pretty decent jingle," chuckled Westbury's Denis O'Driscoll, 69, a retired IT manager who grew up in Washington Heights, Manhattan, just across the river from

the New Jersey park. He also remembers the ubiquitous DC Comics coupon ads variously featuring Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman ("Free Admission / Circus Acts / Parking / Worth 85¢").

Palisades Park rose piece by piece starting in 1898. In 1910, brothers Nicholas and Joseph Schenck — later



Singer Dion DiMucci, in 1963, is one of many headliners who performed at Freedomland U.S.A. in the Bronx.

among the most powerful studio chiefs in Hollywood — purchased the property and began constructing attractions including what was then the world's largest outdoor saltwater pool. Then in 1934, brothers Irving and Jack Rosenthal took over and made that 38-acre site the fabled amusement park of many Long Islanders' youth.

Huntington musician Marian Mastrorilli, 63, an office administrator for SUNY Maritime College in the Bronx, grew up in Cliffside Park, one of the two towns Palisades straddled. "Every spring you would wait for them to take the covers off of the rides, or you would drive by one day and the covers would be off, and that would be a harbinger of summer."

She remembers the fabled hole in the back fence, through which kids could sneak in and save the 10¢ admission fee. "Uncle Irving" Rosenthal, widely regarded as kindly — and who despite his millions was there daily, chatting with parkgoers and even picking up litter — knew about it and even condoned it as a goodwill gesture, according to the son of longtime general manager John Rinaldi Sr. to a reporter in 2018.

Acknowledged Mastrorilli: "The owners of the park were well-known for having that secret way in for kids," where park employees "would look the other way. It was a widely known thing: 'Hey, you can get in through this broken fence!'"

Once inside, you could take a Flight to Mars in that funhouse dark ride where aliens would startle and scare you; sneak a kiss on the Caterpillar, where a pop-up canopy would cover riders in cars on a circular track; climb to the top of the Batman Slide, then ride a burlap mat down a long spiral ramp; strap yourself into a seat of the variously named Rocketship / AstroJet / Missile / Space Rocket / Trip to the Moon, a primitive virtual-reality experience in which a movie screen simulated space flight; and scream aboard such

roller coasters as the Wild Mouse, the Wildcat and the Cyclone (not Coney Island's).

Newsday paper deliverers could even win free trips. One such paperboy, Bob Beattie, 71, now retired from the hospitality industry and living in Wilton Manors, Florida, said they could win prizes for signing up new subscriptions. "Palisades was one of the great prizes. It only took two subscriptions," he recalled. Other awards ran the gamut from bicycles to trips to Maine, New York City and Miami Beach, he said.

On Palisades days, the deliverers would meet at the chaperoned bus in late afternoon, and be handed tickets for rides and for food stands. "But they also had a restaurant there," Beattie said, "and because we had paper routes, we had money. So we would go sit in the restaurant and maybe get a pizza and watch the [live music] shows from in there."

That included concerts hosted by fabled New York DJ Cousin Brucie, said Beattie, who remembers seeing Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons, the Shirelles and Paul Revere and the Raiders — just a few of the countless major names to play there.

And it wasn't just Newsday who rewarded kids with free trips to Palisades. Rich Kolker, 70, a retired computer programmer and foreign-service officer who now lives in Ashburn, Virginia, would go courtesy of Huntington High School.

"We did a big musical production every year with the drama students and choral students and anybody else who wanted to try out," he said. "We would do four shows and we sold tickets and always made money. So with the money we made from selling tickets, the school about three or four weeks later would pile everybody into school buses and drive out to Palisades Amusement Park. Everybody would get a big sheet of ride tickets."

But the most important thing to come out of those trips for him was the kitchen witch.

At an air-rifle concession, he had won "this little plastic witch on a broom. I didn't have any idea what it was. And I brought it home and showed it to my mom, who said, 'Oh, that's a kitchen witch,'" a folk-art good-luck object. "And she took it and hung it up in her kitchen."

After a pause he added, "I just lost my mom this past October. But the witch was there till the day she died." Beattie has kept it since.

The Palisades dream ended on Sept. 12, 1971. Irving Rosenthal, the surviving brother, sold the property that year to a developer. Condominium towers now stand where the whoops and screams of delighted children used to waft along the Hudson.

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