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Local

'We kind of took it for granted': The story behind SF's iconic amusement park, Playland at the Beach

HAVE
FUN
AT
PLAYLAND
BOWLIN
SKEE BALL

Courtesy of Dennis O'Rorke

Amanda Bartlett, SFGATE Aug. 8, 2021 | Updated: Aug. 10, 2021 10:15 a.m.

The incessant cackle echoed over the sound of crashing

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waves on Ocean Beach, the same way it always had. But this time, there was a tinge of nostalgia to the familiar, haunting sound.

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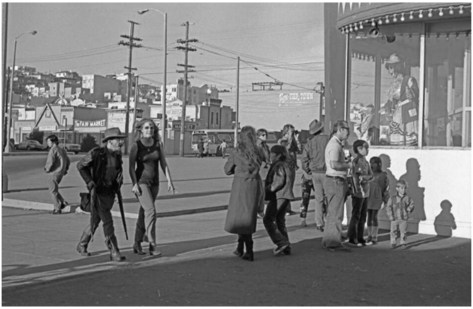
The crowd, spanning an estimated 10,000 people, may have been the largest that Playland-at-the-Beach had seen in months. It was an uncharacteristically sunny Labor Day weekend in 1972, and everyone — young pigtailed girls, elderly couples, curious families with cameras — was there to take one last look at the place.



People hang out at Playland-at-the-Beach in the years leading up to its closure and demolition.
Courtesy of Dennis O'Rorke

They still grinned (or covered their eyes) at the sight of Laffing Sal, the mechanical woman whose waving arms and howls of laughter had greeted them for over 35 years. They ventured into the Fun House, where they once whiled away summer hours, gawking at their distorted reflections in curved mirrors and taking trips down a massive wooden slide on burlap sacks. They meandered toward the midway, where they munched on It's-Its and bricks of red-dusted popcorn, barely able to squeeze past the throngs of up to 50,000 people that once populated the park in its heyday.

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by Taboola

MACK'S SHACK
CANDY FACTORY

The crowds at Playland.
Courtesy of Dennis O'Rorke

Now, there were paint-peeling signs and empty pinball machines. The merry-go-round whirled with only a handful of riders. The Diving Bell — a submarine-style ride that promised a deep-sea adventure with views of real fish and originally debuted at the 1939 World's Fair on Treasure Island — was rusted and covered in algae, and beer cans bobbed on the surface of the water. Some mused the teddy bears and Kewpie dolls once won over games of Skee-ball or Fascination would become collector's items. The Big Dipper roller coaster was gone.

The same thought seemed to be on everyone's mind: What happened?

DARK MYSTERY
5 BALLS
10¢
21 OR OVER
9 OR UNDER
WINS
4 WINS

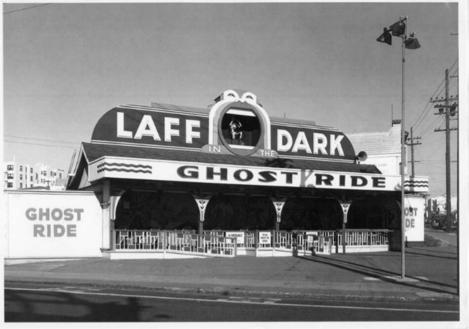
One of the game vendors in the arcade at Playland, circa 1954.
Underwood Archives/Getty Images

Playland-at-the-Beach began in the 1880s as a series of food stands located south of the Cliff House. By 1921, there were 10 attractions including a now-famous carousel created by Charles I.D. Looff, which was allegedly intended for a Coney Island-inspired theme park on Market and 8th streets called Steeple Chase Park, which was destroyed in the aftermath of the 1906 earthquake.

The merry-go-round then found its home on Ocean Beach alongside Shoot-the-Chutes, an offshoot of the original water ride on Haight Street that entertained thousands of thrill-seekers from 1895 to 1902. It was the namesake for what would become Chutes at the Beach, a park run in partnership by Charles' youngest son Arthur Looff and John Friedle, who started out as a candy concessionaire on the waterfront.

Lollipops sold at Playland.
Courtesy of Dennis O'Rorke

George Whitney joined the pair in 1923, following the installment of the wooden Big Dipper roller coaster — arguably the park's biggest draw — as well as a new-and-improved fun house. He ran his own "while-you-wait" photo studio in addition to four shooting galleries and a souvenir shop. As time went on, he and his brother Leo acquired more and more of the park, eventually purchasing the bulk of Friedle's investment after Looff had already moved on. By 1928, it had been renamed Whitney's Playland, but most referred to it as Playland-at-the-Beach, and the name stuck. Leo Whitney retired in 1939, and by 1942, George Whitney owned all 10 acres of the amusement park.



Laff-in-the-Dark, a pioneering dark ride at Playland.
Courtesy of Dennis O'Rorke

After World War II, its popularity boomed. Playland was open from noon until midnight every day, and became a year-round mecca for cheap thrills — one that practically all of San Francisco wanted to experience despite the frequent fog and chilly weather. One favorite was Laff-in-the-Dark, a horror attraction and pioneering dark ride with cheap gags like faux cobwebs dangling from the roof that would brush the faces of guests as they passed through. Mischievous teenage employees, bored by their shifts at the concession stands, would frequently sneak in and jump out at unsuspecting guests at various points in the ride, remembers Dennis O'Rorke, a former gardener at Golden Gate Park who previously resided on 48th Avenue, his living room window overlooking the park.

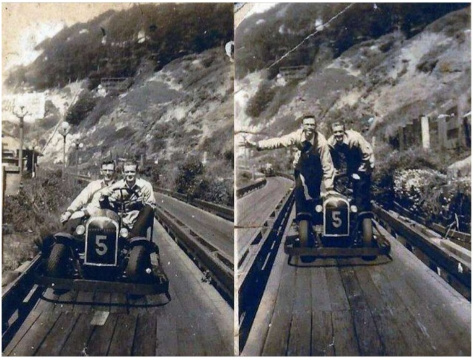
Teenagers bringing their own skates to Skateland.
Courtesy of Dennis O'Rorke

“I really don't have a first impression of Playland. I was brought there before the age of 1 so it seemed to me that it had always been there,” he said. “But growing up, every time I revisited, there was a rush as I entered. The hurdy-gurdy sounds of music from the midway, the screams of delight from the rides, the scent of cotton candy and candy apples... that never wore off.”

Laffing Sal greets visitors at Playland.
Courtesy of Dennis O'Rorke

Every weekend, thousands of people spilled out of streetcars and buses at the end of the line, drawn in by the scintillating lights that beckoned from the midway and the mechanical clink-clink-clink of the Big Dipper climbing up the hill.

“It wasn't quite a big event, like going on a vacation somewhere. It was more or less like a playground for us. A place for us to hang out. And we kind of took it for granted,” said Ray Shanahan, a Novato resident who grew up on 40th Avenue between Balboa and Cabrillo. “You could get into the fun house for nine cents as a kid and spend your whole day there."


Ray Shanahan's uncle Jim (right) runs the Red Bug ride with a friend from high school in this photo taken in 1936.
Courtesy of Ray Shanahan

His uncle Jim was a ride operator for the Red Bug, an early go-kart-like ride in the 1930s, and he and his siblings visited the park regularly a decade later. Today, he's an administrator of a Facebook group dedicated to memories of the park with 5,800 members.

"You could actually hear Playland from our house," said Shanahan. "There was the sound of Laffing Sal cackling at night, and the roller coaster as it would climb up to its peak and suddenly descend with all of these screams. Especially when the fog came in... the wind would pick up the noises like they were right across the street."

Teddy bears and Kewpie dolls were popular prizes at the Midway.

Courtesy of Dennis O'Rorke

Shoot the Chutes was torn down to make way for more rides at the growing amusement park in 1950, and four years later, Walt Disney visited Playland in search of inspiration for Disneyland. He ended up hiring Whitney's son, George Whitney Jr., as his seventh engineer, and it was the ride consultant's insistence that Disney could not use real animals on his Jungle Cruise attraction that eventually led to the invention of audio animatronics, suggests the 2010 documentary, "Remembering Playland at the Beach." Whitney went on to become the Manager of Fantasyland.

But Playland's glory days were waning. The Big Dipper was razed in 1955 due to rising costs to keep the ride in operation, but its replacement, a Wild Mouse roller coaster called Alpine Racer, never achieved the same level of popularity. Whitney died in 1958, and his son left his job at Disneyland to take over the park. Two months later, a fire of undetermined origin ravaged a large L-shaped warehouse at Playland, according to the National Amusement Park Historical Association's journal. The four-alarm blaze took more than two hours to contain, in addition to causing over $400,000 in damages and injuring five firefighters.

The inside of the Fun House.
Courtesy of Dennis O'Rorke

In an attempt to match the allure of Disneyland, Whitney Jr. replaced Laff-in-the-Dark with a themed land called Fun-Tier Town in 1960, complete with a painted desert backdrop and a miniature train that ran around it. Around the same time, he also sold his family's controlling interest in Playland to developer Robert Frazier.

"That's when it all started to fall apart," said Shanahan. "It began to deteriorate and he did whatever he could to keep it going."

RANGE
THE GUN
SHOTS
50¢

People hang out at Playland-at-the-Beach in the years leading up to its closure and demolition.
Courtesy of Dennis O'Rorke

The salty air was taking its toll on the corroding rides, which proved costly and difficult to maintain. Families stopped showing up as frequently as they once did as muggings, vandalism and petty crime grew rampant — not to mention the public's interest was shifting to newer, shinier forms of entertainment.

"The people who would go out to Playland at night started staying at home to watch TV," said Shanahan.

The Whitney family sold the contract for park management to Martin "Marty" Davis in 1968, and Playland subsequently took on more of a tawdry, carnival-like feel. An article published in the Chronicle on Aug. 22, 1971 echoed Shanahan's sentiments, claiming the park was "both physically and spiritually a shadow of its former self … Man went to the moon and the ferris wheel seemed awfully tame and unsophisticated by comparison."

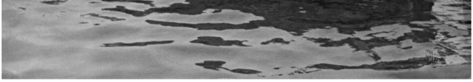
FUN HOUSE
Bobber

People hang out at Playland-at-the-Beach in the years leading up to its closure and demolition.
Courtesy of Dennis O'Rorke

“The idea of Playland hasn’t changed but the equipment has. All it would take is a little paint to touch things up but we don’t have the money,” ride manager Albert H. Rodin told the Chronicle at the time, acknowledging that visitors had taken notice of the park’s decline. “We get 20 calls a day from people asking if we are still in business… Playland is alive … but it’s just marking time.”

With the park’s downfall imminent, developer Jeremy Ets-Hokin received unanimous approval from the S.F. Planning Commission in 1972 to convert Playland into a $50 million apartment complex, with plans to include a shopping center and a parkway connecting Sutro Heights and Golden Gate Park. The plan was fervently opposed by the Outer Richmond Neighborhood Association and other local groups, and a column penned by Herb Caen with the headline “We’ll Never Go There Anymore” detailed the park’s final hours:

RIDE AS LONG AS YOU WISH
OVER 5 MINUTES
3
PLUS TAX PER EXTRA MINUTES
2



A father and his son take a spin on a boat ride at Playland in the mid-1950s.
Underwood Archives/Getty Images

“Along with the familiar aroma of salt air, popcorn, tobacco and greasy food there is the smell of death,” wrote Caen. “Goodbye to all that, to part of our youth, and like that youth, we expected Playland to last forever. It is an odd, sad feeling to have outlived it.”

With the exception of Laffing Sal, purchased by Ets-Hokin, the iconic Looff carousel, which was secured from an auction for a single $45,000 bid by MaryAnn Stevens, and a few other miscellaneous objects salvaged from people who broke into the park after its closure, much of the park’s memorabilia was lost on the weekend of Playland’s demolition.

The demolished fun house.
Courtesy of Dennis O’Rorke

“We drove down there, and I saw the rubble,” said Neal Hemming, a stationary engineer for the Murphy Windmill in Golden Gate Park who was 11 years old at the time. “The saddest thing is how uneventful it was. To run a bulldozer and do irreparable damage only takes a few hours. They destroyed the whole place as fast as they could, and that was it.”

O’Rorke also remembers witnessing the decimation of Playland from his living room window.

A view of the demolished Playland from O'Rorke's living room window.
Courtesy of Dennis O'Rorke

‘It was more than depressing,” he said. “I think the owners realized they could sell the land for a huge profit and be done with the responsibility of running the operation. I think that that land was zoned for public recreation and the city was more than remiss in not assuring that the area remained a place for all to enjoy on a recreational basis.”

However, Ets-Hokin’s project never saw the light of day. In the 2010 documentary on Playland, former employee Marvin Gold insisted that because the park was destroyed without a demolition permit, the city’s Board of Supervisors placed a temporary moratorium on building new development in the area, and the area sat empty for years. According to the Examiner, the deal fell through because Ets-Hokin lost his financing “in the collapse of the San Diego-based money empire of C. Arnholt Smith,” and was later arrested in connection with a multimillion-dollar securities theft in 1979. He died after a six-week illness in 1981, and was identified in his obituary as “the man who razed Playland.” Two other developers — Tef Kutay and Zev ben Simon's Taldan Investment Co. — built condos over the site in the 1980s, with the last 1.7-acre fragment of land approved for development in 1993.

A crane next to the rubble.
Courtesy of Dennis O'Rorke

Still, some aspects of Playland were preserved after people went into the wreckage of the demolished park, salvaging what they could.

Some of these mementos were displayed at Playland-not-at-the-beach, a museum in El Cerrito run by Richard Tuck and Frank Biafore. But after a decade in operation, it too faced a similar fate: The facility was razed for housing in 2018, and nearly all of its antique oddities were auctioned off once again.

But other traces of Playland are still celebrated today at the Musée Mécanique on Pier 45, which holds many of the park's arcade games as well as a back-up Laffing Sal (the original now lives at the Santa Cruz boardwalk). At the entryway of the Balboa Theatre in the Outer Richmond, moviegoers will encounter an authentic Playland bumper car, as well as a menu board from the Bull Pupp and the Miss Playland 1969 voting ballot box, among other relics from the park. Sheriff C.U. Soon of Fun-Tier Land fame was saved by the Western Neighborhoods Project and will greet visitors as part of an exhibit at the organization's office and gallery on Balboa Street. The Looff carousel still spins at the Children's Creativity Museum in SoMa, and you might find a couple of framed photographs of Playland inside Red's Java House on the Embarcadero.

SAFEWAY
FUN HOUSE
THE FLASHER CO.

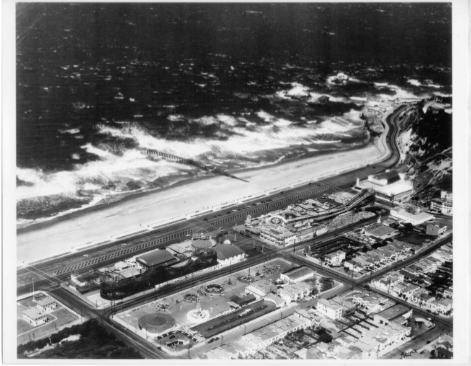
Playland shortly after its demolition.

Courtesy of Dennis O'Rorke

Every once in a while, Hemming is reminded of Playland when he passes the cable car barn on Mason Street. The unmistakable smell of burning grease wafts into the air, and he almost expects the aroma of Hot House french fries to follow. When he climbs toward the top of the Murphy Windmill, and the wind mixed with the ocean breeze hits his face, it's tough not to imagine the joyous shrieks of roller coaster riders from years gone by.

His father used to be a ride operator at Playland and once ran the Looff carousel there. Working as a mechanic among his varied duties with the San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department, Hemming has carried the torch in a sense, now operating the merry-go-round in Golden Gate Park.

"I loved studying the machinery of that place, even as a kid. The designs were amazing, and it was fascinating to see how it all worked," he said. "There are really strong feelings you had as a child as you witnessed this that stick with you all of these years later. Playland wasn't perfect ... but I won't forget it."

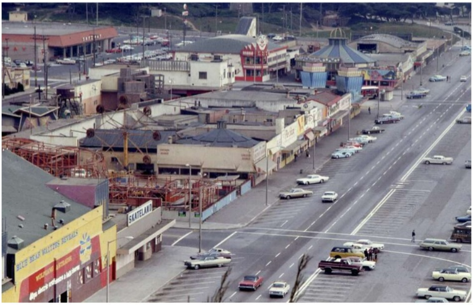


An aerial view of Playland.

Courtesy of Dennis O'Rorke

People hang out at Playland-at-the-Beach in the years leading up to its closure and demolition.

Courtesy of Dennis O'Rorke



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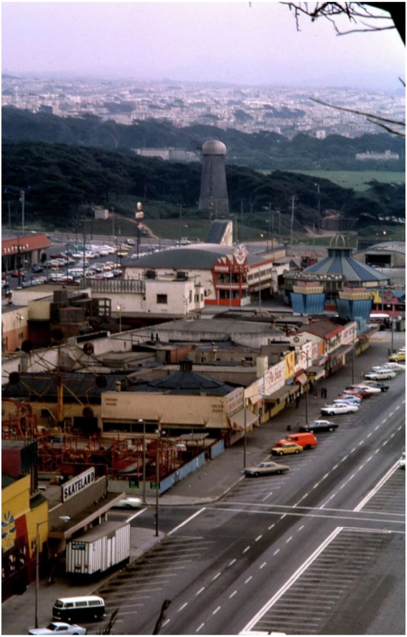
Courtesy of Dennis O'Rorke



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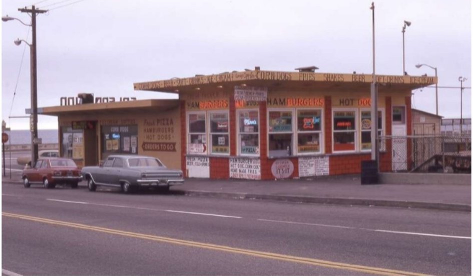
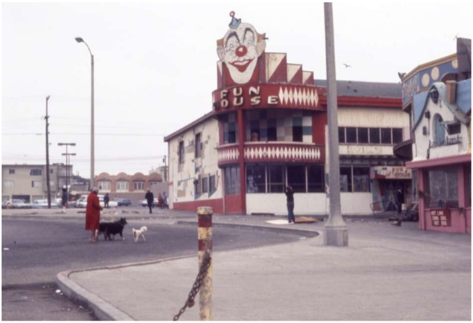
Courtesy of Dennis O'Rorke



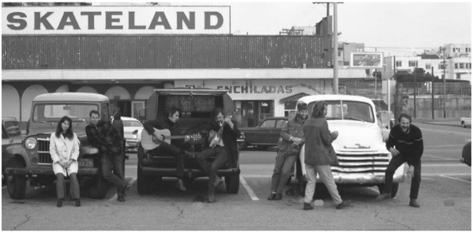
It's-Its are sold at Playland.

Courtesy of Dennis O'Rorke



The exterior of the Fun House.

Courtesy of Dennis O'Rorke



People hang out at Playland-at-the-Beach in the years leading up to its closure and demolition. Skateland was a popular destination for roller skating.

Courtesy of Dennis O'Rorke

PEPSI
ENTRANCE

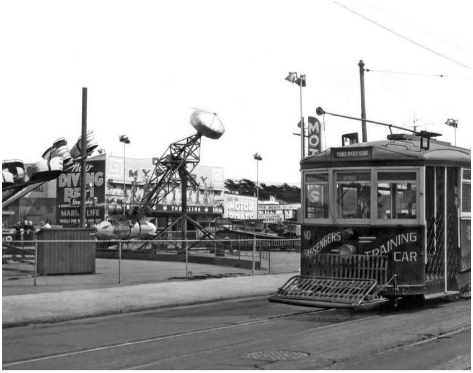
People hang out at Playland-at-the-Beach in the years leading up to its closure and demolition.

Courtesy of Dennis O'Rorke

BULL PUPP
ENCHILADAS CHILI

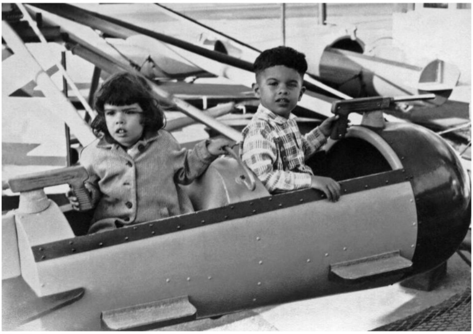
People hang out at Playland-at-the-Beach in the years leading up to its closure and demolition.

Courtesy of Dennis O'Rorke



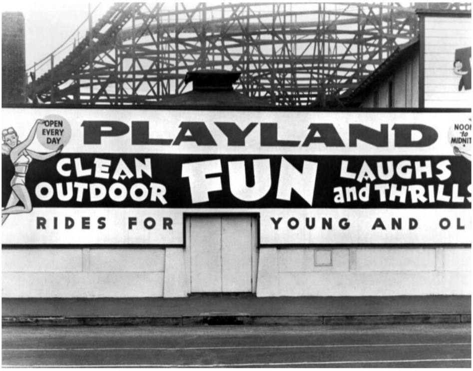
Playland with a training electric street car out front in the early 1950s.

Underwood Archives/Getty Images



Two young children keep an eye out for invaders on Captain Satellite's Space Copter at Playland in the early to mid 1950s.

Underwood Archives/Getty Images



Playland at the Beach in the late 1940s.

Underwood Archives/Getty Images

Written By

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Amanda Bartlett is a culture reporter for SFGATE. Prior to joining the newsroom in 2019, she worked for the Roxie Theater, Noise Pop and Frameline Film Festival. She lives in San Francisco with her rabbit, Cheeto. Send her an email at amanda.bartlett@sfgate.com.

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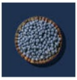

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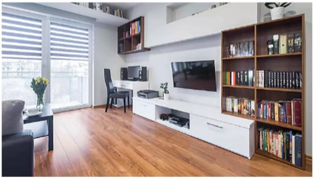

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