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JUDGE ROY'S PLAYGROUND: A HISTORY OF ASTROWORLD

by Karen Guenther

On June 1, 1968, Lt. Governor Preston Smith won the Democratic Party nomination, virtually becoming the next governor of Texas. Robert Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy agreed in a televised debate prior to the California primary that Secretary of State Dean Rusk would be replaced if either were elected president. Houston's newspapers, however, also touted on the front page the opening of Judge Roy Hofheinz's theme park, Astroworld.¹

The youngest judge in the county's history and a former mayor of Houston, Hofheinz had achieved fame and fortune through a variety of business ventures. Earlier in the 1960s he succeeded in bringing major league baseball to Houston and, with the assistance of Harris County taxpayers, oversaw the construction of the "eighth wonder of the world," the Astrodome. The opening of the Astrodome – which was not only a multi-purpose stadium but also Hofheinz's home – was the first in a series of events that led to the construction of a family entertainment complex in south Houston that included hotels, exhibition halls, and an amusement park.²

Hofheinz approved plans for the amusement park in January 1967,³ with the formal announcement made in September. At the press conference, Hofheinz declared that his park would "become the world's greatest tourist attraction, bringing untold millions of dollars into the Houston area economy." Originally fifty-six acres, the Judge indicated that the facility ultimately would become twice that size and entertain over one and a half million visitors annually.⁴

Hofheinz realized that Houston's humid weather would be a factor in the park's success. He indicated that over 2,000 tons of central air conditioning – more than at any other outdoor amusement park in the world – would be blown on all shaded areas, not just inside gift shops and restrooms. One of the rides at the park would give visitors a chance to experience the thrill of real snow and the Abominable Snowman on the "Alpine Sleigh Ride," a toboggan ride through a man-made mountain that the Judge named "Der Hofheinzberg."⁵

Hofheinz's dream was "to create a bright and colorful world where the young and the young at heart could leave their cares behind and enter the timeless, enchanting, ever-changing, fun and fantastical kaleidoscope of a dream come true."⁶ At the same time as he was planning the development of Astroworld, however, Hofheinz became majority stockholder in Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Circuses, Inc., which diverted his full attention from the construction of the park. This acquisition led Hofheinz to hire Stan McIlvaine, a former executive with Great Southwest Corporation that controlled Six Flags Over Texas. McIlvaine provided the benefit of his experience to the proposed amusement park and became its first general manager. Hofheinz also selected architect Randall Duell, an award-winning Hollywood set designer who had expertise in designing theme parks, including

Six Flags Over Texas, and Harper Goff, an Oscar-winning designer, to plan the layout for the amusement section of his entertainment complex.⁷

It is clear that the success of Disneyland and Six Flags Over Texas inspired Hofheinz to create Astroworld. In fact, Hofheinz consulted with the staff at Disneyland when developing the park to avoid problems that had arisen during the construction of their park. To ensure that his park would provide the proper escape experience for children, he took his eldest grandson on a trip to both of these two parks to gauge the child's reaction to various rides and scenes. To determine the "fun quotient" of the new park, Hofheinz arranged for his grandchildren and several of their friends to experience Astroworld two weeks before its official opening. The complex passed inspection, and the seasonal staff of approximately 1,000 college students prepared for the grand opening.⁸

On opening day – June 1, 1968 – over 23,000 visitors enjoyed the shops, rides, and other attractions of the park. Even the weather cooperated; while scattered showers fell over other parts of Houston that day, rain avoided Astroworld. Hofheinz's children and grandchildren were on hand to open the park, with his five grandchildren throwing a gold-colored electrical switch that started the rides.⁹

Besides the sleigh ride, Astroworld included other rides and attractions unique to the park: the Mill Pond, a bumper-car ride on water; an electronic shooting gallery; and the Astrowheel, a futuristic ferris wheel.¹⁰ Guests could experience a Lost World Adventure while touring the Río Misterio on an air-conditioned boat, twirl wildly on the "Maypole" spinning cups, view the park and Houston's skyline from the cabins at the top of the Astroneedle, practice their driving skills behind the wheel of a French taxi or sports car, be jostled by the scrambler-type Orbiter or octopus-like Black Dragon, or travel from one section of the park to another riding the 610 Limited train or the Astroway sky ride. For children, Hofheinz created a special section of the park that contained a miniature carousel, a water ride through a story book of nursery rhymes, a slide enclosed in a Texas-size boot, and a barnyard complete with a petting zoo.¹¹

Visitors on opening day raved about Houston's newest attraction. A reporter from the *Houston Chronicle* interviewed members of the James W. Barker family from Center, Texas, who also had visited Six Flags Over Texas in Arlington. The elder Barker called Astroworld "a fun place," while Mrs. Barker thought it was better for her family to visit than the park near Dallas. The notion that guests could wait for rides in the comfort of air conditioning particularly impressed the family.¹²

Opening day revealed its problems as well. The ride that drew the most attention, the Alpine Sleigh Ride, had not yet been tested, so guests could not experience the thrills of wind blasts of 10° F as they cascaded through a recreation of the Swiss Alps. In addition, two of the "water bug" cars in which guests would ride at the Mill Pond arrived late, and a mechanical failure also hindered the operation of the ride. Despite these setbacks, the general opinion was that Astroworld had "enraptured thousands of young and old alike."¹³

If there was one special feature about Astroworld, it was the impact that Houston's climate had on the park's development. Over 2,400 tons of air conditioning cooled shaded waiting areas, open snack stands, and indoor gift shops. Part of the challenge in constructing the park, then, had been the installation of air vents. The Oriental section of the park included bamboo ceilings, so the engineers had to devise narrow slot outlets that would not detract from the distinctive appearance of the building's interior. At the umbrella-topped tables outside the French-motif Ice Cream Parlour, the table tops had small vents at the post that cooled diners. The system was so elaborate that Astroworld reputedly had "the largest outdoor air conditioning system in the world" in 1968.¹⁴

It was clear, too, that the park had room for further development. The Oriental section of the park had a train station for passengers on the 610 Limited to load and disembark and one end of the sky ride Astroway. Western Junction, in the middle of the park, included such diverse rides as the Mill Pond, the Astroneedle, the other train station, and a tilt-a-whirl type ride known as the Wagon Wheel because of its appearance. This area also contained the Crystal Palace, where live performers entertained the crowds, and a shooting gallery. Other sections of the park included Plaza de Fiesta, which contained the Río Misterio Lost World Adventure, the Black Dragon, and a Plaza de Música where a mariachi band entertained guests; the Children's World; European Village, with the Antique Lé Taxi ride; Alpine Valley and its sleigh ride and Astroway station; Mod Ville, which contained the Astrowheel, Spin Out sports cars, and Orbiter; and Americana Square, which resembled a turn-of-the-century small town with its variety of gift shops and restaurants.¹⁵

Because there still was land to be developed, additional rides appeared at Astroworld over the next few years. In 1970, one of the islands in the lagoon area between the Astroneedle and Plaza de Fiesta became Fun Island. Connected by a rickety, wobbly, wooden bridge to the mainland, Fun Island included a Swamp Buggy ride that traveled inside a tree and then wound around the outside of the trunk. More remarkable was the Wacky Shack, where gravity seemed suspended in a tilted house. By 1971, the Oriental section had gained a miniature roller coaster called the Serpent and a water flume ride where bamboo boats would soak guests and cool them off on a hot day. Mod Ville also saw the addition of the "Barrel of Fun," a ride where centrifugal force pushed riders against the side walls while the floor dropped below them.¹⁶

The first major expansion occurred in 1972 with the opening of the Country Fair section between Americana Square and Oriental Corner. This area recreated a 1900-era fairgrounds, complete with fairway attractions, sweets, and skill games. Among its features were a mirrored carousel, bumper cars, and the Dexter Frebish Electric Roller Ride, a modified mine train that became the first serious roller coaster at the park. Another attraction was the Nickelodeon and Horseless Carriage Pavilion, which served as Hofheinz's museum for antique music boxes and mechanical instruments. The pavilion also included an authentic Nickelodeon movie theater, complete with a short silent film accompanied by live organ music.¹⁷

By the mid-1970s, Hofheinz's business problems affected the operations of Astroworld. Typical of many high profile Houston businessmen of the era, Hofheinz had overextended himself in developing the Astrodomain complex. In addition, his direct participation in the daily affairs of the amusement park declined after he suffered a stroke in 1970. Because of these problems, the Hofheinz family sold parts of the Astrodomain complex, including ownership of the Astros. Astroworld had already left the fold, as the Six Flags Corporation leased the park in May 1975.¹⁸

The acquisition of Astroworld by Six Flags resulted in a renewed emphasis on thrills and entertainment. To celebrate the bicentennial, an eleventh theme area, Coney Island, opened. This section included the former Black Dragon, repainted and renamed the "Razz Ma Tazz;" a food stand that sold Texas-size foot-long "Coney Island" hot dogs; an area with skill games like the original Coney Island midway; and an air-supported theatre that hosted a magic show. The most famous attraction of this new area was the ninety-two foot high Texas Cyclone, a mirror-image of the original Cyclone coaster at Coney Island in New York, only on a larger scale.¹⁹

For roller coaster enthusiasts and thrill seekers alike, Astroworld only entered the modern age with the opening of the Texas Cyclone; it had introduced the ride that quickly achieved fame as "the finest roller coaster ever built."²⁰ *Houston Chronicle* reporter Jeff Millar had another opinion, as riding in the front car enabled him to view every twist, turn, and precipitous drop, prompting him to remark that "my life, as they say, passed before me."²¹ A year later, *Houston Post* columnist Lynn Ashby commemorated the first anniversary of the Texas Cyclone with a review of the ride's construction and appeal. In contrast to Millar's fear, Ashby saw a ride in the front seat as "fun, a great view [where] you get there fustest with the mostest and experience the fear of instant annihilation before anyone else on the train." The back seat – which literally leaps off the track on the first and second dip – "will scramble your pancreas," according to Ashby, enabling you to "get to know your seat mate whether or not you want to." Instead of bolting for the exit, Ashby urged Houstonians to ride the Cyclone again, as once was not enough.²² Coaster enthusiasts have agreed with Ashby's endorsement, and the Texas Cyclone has remained among the top wooden roller coasters in the world.²³

With the infusion of capital from Six Flags following the formal purchase of Astroworld in 1978,²⁴ the emphasis on themed entertainment and thrill rides increased. The Maypole teacup ride outside the Children's section was replaced in 1977 by Aquarena Theatre, which featured a live dolphin show. Mod Ville was renamed International Plaza, and the Orbiter ride moved from its enclosure and the building became "Horizons Theater," where guests viewed movies shown on the panoramic dome ceiling. In 1978, the first loop coaster at the park, Greezed Lightnin', appeared across the railroad tracks from Western Junction Train Depot. Two years later, Thunder River, the world's first man-made, white-water-river-rapids ride, opened across the tracks from Bamboo Shoot in Oriental Corner.²⁵

While the Texas Cyclone has received the most publicity of all the rides at Astroworld, Thunder River has perhaps become the most useful. Inspired by man-made rapids developed for kayak races during the Olympics in 1972, general manager Bill Crandall conceived Thunder River as “‘a takeoff ... on Mother Nature’s ride.’” The circular movement of the raft ensured that the warning in the queue house, “‘You ride hard and come out wet,’” would not disappoint guests.²⁶ The success at simulating whitewater rapids, in fact, led one guide to remark that Thunder River would provide “‘one of the hottest kayak runs on the North American continent.’”²⁷ Since 1985, the Houston Police Department has conducted a rescue clinic for area firemen, game wardens, and emergency medical personnel at the ride because it recreates the activity on a raging river in a controlled environment.²⁸

The 1980s saw several new and exciting rides added to the park. A park visitor in August 1981, remarked that the most popular rides that summer, judging by the length of time guests waited in line, were the Texas Cyclone, Greezed Lightnin’, and Thunder River—two coasters and a water ride guaranteed to soak.²⁹ That year a new futuristic ride, Warp 10, replaced the Astrowheel in International Plaza. In 1983, a ten-story free-fall ride, Sky-screamer, opened in the Plaza de Fiesta, while one of the original rides, the Alpine Sleigh Ride, departed. The region formerly occupied by the sleighs and the French taxis became Enchanted Kingdom in 1984, a recreational activity center for children and their parents. That same year the former children’s section became the site for XLR-8, a unique suspended roller coaster that enabled the cars to sway as they swooped along the track.³⁰ Environmentalism came to Astroworld in 1985, when the Lost World Adventure was remodeled and renamed The Wetlands, complete with a display about the environment assembled by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service available for reading while waiting in line. A feature in the *Houston Post* in 1985 promoted this change as both “‘an educational experience ... [and] a relaxing break between hair-raising rides.’”³¹ Looping Starship, a passenger spaceship that carried riders through several 360° orbits, opened in 1986 on the site of Warp 10, which reappeared in the Plaza de Fiesta section a year later as Warp 2000.³² Tidal Wave replaced Wetlands in 1988, with passengers going over a sixty-five-foot waterfall and getting even more drenched than on Thunder River.³³ The park rearranged Oriental Corner in 1989 and squeezed a steel loop roller coaster called the Viper into part of Fun Island and the former location of Runaway Rickshaws, which was the name for the Orbiter ride once it relocated to the Oriental section. The Viper was tamer than the world-famous Texas Cyclone and Greezed Lightnin’ but more hair-raising than XLR-8.³⁴

Astroworld underwent many other changes during the 1980s besides adding new rides. In 1981, the park rethemed the Country Fair section and renamed it Nottingham Village; the former Dexter Frebush Electric Roller Ride became known as Excalibur. The “Airena Theatre” in the Coney Island section became a permanent structure, known as Showcase Theatre. A year later, the Crystal Palace in Western Junction ceased to have live performers. Instead, mechanical livestock debuted in the “Great Texas Longhorn Revue” at the

refurbished Cow Palace.³⁵ The first waterpark in the Six Flags family, WaterWorld, opened in 1983 adjacent to the eastern edge of the park. WaterWorld included water slides, rides, pools, and waterfalls for adults and even scaled-down versions of these attractions for children.³⁶ In 1985, Pace Productions joined Astroworld in opening Southern Star Amphitheatre, a concert arena that seated 3,000 guests in chairs and another 20,000 on the lawn rising above the stage. With concert admission often free with park admission, Southern Star quickly became the "premier outdoor concert facility in the Southwest."³⁷ The park's operating season extended into October for the first time in 1986, when "Fright Nights" enabled young Houstonians to trick-or-treat at Houston's largest Halloween party.³⁸ Christmas came to Astroworld in 1988 with the first celebration of "Holiday in the Park," where guests could go sledding down a man-made snow hill, which actually was the lawn seating area for Southern Star Amphitheatre, skate on an ice rink, or take a carriage ride through the park.³⁹

The emphasis on thrill rides and water rides has continued into the 1990s, as park planners realized the need to entertain, to excite, and to comfort tourists. In 1990, the Ultra Twister debuted and was billed as "the only roller coaster of its kind in the world" because of its ninety-two-foot drop straight down, after which the cars would make 360° rotations while traveling forward, then backward.⁴⁰ The Condor in 1991 had riders twisting and turning while riding to the top of the bird's wing span and then back down.⁴¹ Adventure Rivers replaced the Condor in 1992 as Astroworld united Texas history and water slides by giving visitors a chance to experience rafting down the Brazos, Colorado, Pecos, and Rio Grande rivers. This ride represented a renewed emphasis on theming that had disappeared early in the 1980s, as part of the "adventure" involved walking past Old West set decorations and signs providing brief histories of the rivers.⁴²

Theming a ride – or making the actual ride part of a larger entertainment experience than merely having one's body tossed about on a roller coaster – took a further step in 1993 with the introduction of Texas' first stand-up roller coaster, Batman the Escape. The ride's developers recognized that the popularity of the Batman character, combined with the excitement of a coaster, would result in long lines. To get the riders in the proper frame of mind, queue lines took them through the Batcave, Arctic Park – which was a remnant of the original Der Hofheinzberg – and Gotham City Cold Storage, constantly assaulted by audio messages and visual effects. The ride itself served as a means for the guests to escape from the clutches of the Penguin, who pursued them through the queue lines.⁴³ The latest coaster addition continued the concept of making the ride part of a larger entertainment experience. The Mayan Mindbender, which opened in 1995, received its inspiration from the popular Indiana Jones movies of the 1980s.⁴⁴ Enclosed in a structure that resembles an ancient Mayan temple, the Mayan Mindbender is geared to families yet does have its own scare factor in that it is totally in the dark. The sounds of hissing snakes and the sight of flashing lights enhance the sensory experience of this indoor coaster.⁴⁵ The most recent coaster addition to the

park, Dungeon Drop, takes riders through a recreated medieval dungeon while waiting in line for the ride.

The ownership of Astroworld also changed considerably during the 1980s and 1990s. Six Flags purchased the park in 1978, and the corporation sold it and other Six Flags parks to Bally Manufacturing Corp. in 1982. Wesray Corporation, a private investment company, bought the Six Flags parks from Bally in 1987,⁴⁶ and in 1990 Time Warner acquired a 19.5 percent stake in the company.⁴⁷ Time Warner increased its holdings to 50 percent in August 1991,⁴⁸ and bought the remaining portion in September 1993.⁴⁹ Time Warner reduced its holdings to 49 percent in April 1995, but remained the majority stockholder in Six Flags.⁵⁰

Over the years, other theme parks and amusement centers have opened in the Houston area. More often than not, these developments have proven futile. The Anheuser-Busch brewery company operated a Busch Gardens early in the 1970s that lasted one year before becoming a bird park, and then closed several years later when the company expanded its production facilities.⁵¹ In 1984, Hanna Barbera Land opened in north Houston, primarily to cater to young children, but it closed a couple of years later and was replaced by Splashtown, a water park.⁵² Even Sea Arama in Galveston did not fare well and ceased operations in January 1990.⁵³ With the addition of thrill rides and a renewed emphasis on themed entertainment, Astroworld has increased its attendance during the 1990s while other theme parks in Texas have experienced declining visitation.⁵⁴ During its first twenty years, over thirty million tourists from around the world came to Astroworld, indeed pumping untold millions of dollars into Houston's economy just as Judge Hofheinz predicted.⁵⁵

In addition to thrills and chills, Astroworld has presented a variety of live shows to entertain guests. In 1973, the park hosted Jerry Lewis's Labor Day telethon for Muscular Dystrophy.⁵⁶ Airena Theatre opened in 1976 with the Mark Wilson Magic Show as the featured attraction.⁵⁷ The lagoon area of the park has served as the site for performances by the Great American High Diving Team⁵⁸ and, most recently, the "Batman Forever Water Stunt Spectacular" stunt show. For children, costumed characters from the unique crew of Marvel McFey and Friends to the Warner Bros.' Looney Tunes and Animaniacs have enhanced their Astroworld experience. Finally, local talent such as Randy and Dennis Quaid⁵⁹ have performed in vaudeville and Broadway-style shows since the late 1960s, often gaining valuable experience for careers in the entertainment industry.

In 1996, the management of Six Flags Theme Parks developed a mission statement that essentially restates what Judge Roy Hofheinz perceived as the true purpose of his park: to provide "unique, exciting, themed entertainment experiences ... to people of all ages." If Judge Hofheinz were alive today, the Astroworld he would see would hardly resemble the park that opened in June 1968. Nevertheless, he undoubtedly would have approved of the growth and development of the park. Only six of the original rides remain, and all of them have undergone modifications or relocation since 1968. Also, dozens of

additional rides and attractions have been added to thrill, jolt, and soak visitors and thus to encourage them to return to the park. Indeed, Astroworld has succeeded in becoming a playground that amuses millions of tourists annually.

To understand more completely the significance of Astroworld in local history, several other issues remain to be addressed. The concern about safety in the amusement parks that arose in the 1980s, including congressional hearings on the subject, is worthy of additional exploration, especially in light of the few accidents the park has experienced over the years. Further research would reveal the changing composition of its seasonal staff of "hosts and hostesses" from Hofheinz's emphasis on college students to the more diversified work force of today. Finally, the history of Judge Hofheinz's amusement park is important in understanding the way Americans spend their leisure time. Astroworld serves primarily to entertain, yet it is just as much of the American historical landscape as a Civil War battlefield.⁶⁰

NOTES

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⁵Evans, "Astroworld Park," pp. 1, 20.

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⁸Ray, *Grand Huckster*, pp. 366, 422; and "The Disneyland Effect," *Time*, 91 (June 14, 1968), p. 54.

⁹Frank Davis, "Crowds Thrilled by Astroworld," *Houston Post*, June 2, 1968, p. A2; and "Astroworld Reaction: 'It's A Fun Place,'" *Houston Chronicle*, June 2, 1968, sect. 1, p. 1.

¹⁰Egger, "Astroworld," p. 17.

¹¹Egger, "Astroworld," p.17; Evans, "Astroworld Park," p. 20; and Map of Astroworld in 1968.

¹²"Astroworld Reaction," p. 1.

¹³"Astroworld Reaction," p. 1; "Amusement Park in Texas is Climate Conditioned," *Electrical World*, 170 (September 9, 1968), p. 45; I. A. Naman and Jack B. Buckley, "Air Conditioning the Outdoors at Astroworld," *Heating, Piping and Air Conditioning*, 40 (August 1968), p. 74; and "New Astro-attraction," *Houston Chronicle*, June 2, 1968, sect. 5, p. 4.

¹⁴Naman and Buckley, "Air Conditioning," p. 72; and "Amusement Park," p. 45.

¹⁵Map of Astroworld in 1968.

¹⁶"Astroworld Evolution," p. 3; Typewritten history of the park distributed by the Public Relations Department at Six Flags Houston.

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¹⁸Adine Lundgren, "Astrodomain to Get Operating Funds," *Houston Post*, June 25, 1975, pp. 1A, 9A; and Ray, *Grand Huckster*, pp. 513-519.

¹⁸Jeff Millar, "Astroworld's 'Cyclone' Blows In," *Houston Chronicle*, June 12, 1976, sect. 2, p. 1; and Felicia Coates and Harriet Howles, *Texas Monthly's Guide to Houston*, rev. ed. (Austin: Texas Monthly, 1976), p. 119.

¹⁹Robert Cartmell, *The Incredible Scream Machine: A History of the Roller Coaster* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, and Fairview Park, OH: Amusement Park Books, Inc., 1987), p. 191.

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²²John Stark, "Hold on Tight for a Trip on the 10 Best Roller Coasters in the Land," *People*, 22 (July 30, 1984), p. 81.

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²⁵1980 Astroworld Yearbook.

²⁶Pamela Lewis, "Thunder River: You're in Control, But You're Out of Control," *Houston Post*, May 17, 1980, p. B1.

²⁷"Practice for an Emergency," *Houston Chronicle*, April 7, 1990, p. 9B.

²⁸Clifford Pugh, "A Guide to Astroworld," *Houston Post*, August 7, 1981, p. E6.

²⁹"Astroworld Evolution," [p. 4].

³⁰Christi Fowler, "Astroworld, A Roller Coaster Ride Away: Take the Kid in You to Texas' Largest Amusement Park," *Houston Post*, August 9, 1985, p. E9. The change probably was hastened by the destruction of one of the ride's landmarks the previous operating season. See: "King Kong 'Dies' in Smoky Blaze; Astroworld Figure Destroyed," *Houston Post*, April 19, 1984, p. A17.

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³²"Astroworld Opens 20th Season," *Houston Chronicle*, March 17, 1988, sect. 7, p. 5.

³³Louis B. Parks, "It's a Scream: Viper Adds Thrills, Chills to Astroworld," *Houston Chronicle*, May 12, 1989, p. 1E.

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³⁵1983 Astroworld Yearbook, p. 97; and Christi Foster, "Keep Your Cool at WaterWorld," *Houston Post*, August 9, 1985, pp. E1, E11.

³⁶1985 Astroworld Yearbook, p. 151.

³⁷"Astroworld Evolution," [p. 4].

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⁵⁵Claudia Feldman, "It Was 20 Years Ago Today: AstroWorld Marks Birthday," *Houston Chronicle*, June 1, 1988, sect. 4, p. 1.

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⁵⁷1976 Yearbook, p. 108.

⁵⁸1978 Yearbook, p. 136.

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⁶⁰For more information on the interpretation of amusement parks in the American scene, see: Russel B. Nye, "Eight Ways of Looking at an Amusement Park," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 15 (Summer 1981), pp. 63-75.