

HISTORICAL SOCIETY NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

THE TROLLEY AND NEW CASTLE'S CASCADE PARK, 1897

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THE key that opened the door to New Castle's Cascade Park was the mode of transportation that developed in the 1890s. The electric railroad, otherwise known as the electric street railway car or the "trolley," quickly replaced the horse-drawn urban railcar by the turn of the century. While private electric street railway companies and city officials worked to create the new system, the trolley park emerged both as a promotional item for electric street railways and as a new concept in recreation. Cascade Park was one of the first such trolley parks in Western Pennsylvania.

The land near the falls of Big Run Creek has a rich history. It was said to have been a favorite campsite of the Delaware Indians. Then, after the Revolutionary War, government land grants enabled settlement of the area around New Castle. In fact, the earliest individual connected with ownership of Big Run Falls was a man named Paterson who possibly received the land as a soldier's grant.

Not until the late nineteenth century did the site become attractive as a park. In 1892, Colonel Levi C. Brinton, who had acquired the land, built amusements overlooking the falls and promoted it as Brinton Park. Colonel Brinton later laid his own rails from the Franklin Avenue track end in New Castle to the park on Electric Light Plant land, but as the New Castle Electric Street Railway Company had the only franchise for railcar operation and would not lease rights for railcar operation, Brinton could not extend such transit to the park. He went to court, and in the course of the trial, the energetic jury walked from the city to Big Run Falls over the proposed three-mile route.¹ The court did not support Brinton's position.

In early summer 1896, the New Castle Electric Railway Company offered Brinton an unstated amount in payment for the acquisition of the park and the rail lines. In the meantime, speculation had it during the summer of 1896 that a new electric line, an interurban, would be

Mr. Cohen works for Town Consultants, Inc., of Pittsburgh. He adds that New Castle is planning to restore Cascade Park as a historical and environmental resource.—Editor

¹ *New Castle News*, Feb. 5, 1896.

built from Pittsburgh to New Castle. Brinton's counteroffer to the Electric Railway Company for the park and fifty surrounding acres was \$50,000, which the Electric Railway Company summarily rejected. However, by right of the company's acquisition of the New Castle Electric Light Plant, it owned Brinton's right of way. Brinton was aroused to the point of violence when he discovered that eighty men from the Electric Railway Company turned out one morning and tore up the rails he had laid.² Further, because of the deadlock over the sale of Brinton Park, there was now talk the Electric Railway Company would open a new railcar-serviced park on the Fromhagen Farm which the company had purchased near Highland Avenue in Neshannock Township.

At the same time, the electric street railway system moved ahead in the city of New Castle. On August 5, 1896, the *New Castle News* printed the enabling ordinance for in-city railway lines. Council Bill 19 set the conditions, among them a stipulation that the gauge of railway tracks should be four feet, eight and one-half inches, which was standard railroad gauge. On November 4, 1896, the headline was "GOOD CARS — That is What Will Run On New Castle's Streets," and the story described the product of the New Castle Car Manufacturing Company. The frames of the streetcars were made from the best white ash, some of which was obtained in the county and some which came from Ohio and Indiana. Their floors were of Georgia pine. All cars were of an up-to-date style, and it was emphasized, were built for beauty as well as strength and speed. The company's finishing department accented the work with a mahogany or cherry finish before the cars were painted and ironwork was added.

The newspaper provided additional details :

These cars were 25 feet in length including the vestibule at each end which will leave them 16 feet in the clear. The aisles are broad and convenient. They will seat 24 persons, but when standing room in the aisles and vestibules are filled, they will each carry 55 or 60 passengers. These cars will have concave panels and with these long vestibules will make an attractive appearance. The seats will be similar to those in the old cars, that is longitudinal, but will be much better finished. They will be cushioned in velvet carpet. They will be heated and lighted by the latest improved methods with electricity.³

Brinton's own venture collapsed the following year. Having suffered a rumored \$30,000 loss on rails, and with little prospect for economic success, Brinton sold his land to Harry Palmer and a certain Mr. VanHorne, who may have been agents of a new street railway

² *Ibid.*, Aug. 12, 1896.

³ *Ibid.*, Nov. 4, 1896.

syndicate. On January 12, 1897, the syndicate incorporated as the New Castle Traction Company and bought the land from Palmer and VanHorne. To promote ridership, the company made a firm commitment to further development of the park. It hired a Mr. Blaisdell from Boston to be the landscape architect in charge of design and held a local contest to name the park. The entry of ten-year-old Edwina Norris, the daughter of a local industrialist, won the contest. Thereafter, the resort was known as Cascade Park, because of the cascading effect of Big Run Falls.

On Saturday, May 30, 1897, "Cascade Park, the most beautiful pleasure resort in Western Pennsylvania, was thrown open to the public."⁴ The first cars left the New Castle Traction Company offices loaded with company officials and guests, press, and the citizens' band. At 3:00 P.M., the regular cars began making scheduled round trips, "and the scramble to get on board was unlike anything ever witnessed in New Castle."⁵ The cars rolled down to Washington and Mill streets, then to Mill and Pittsburgh streets, then on Mill Street to the double tracks on South Mill to Long Avenue and down Hamilton Street. The journey, through three miles of city, countryside, and woods, ended at the terminal building at Cascade Park. The advertised fare one-way was five cents from New Castle, but the park attracted people from throughout Western Pennsylvania.

The visitor riding the trolley saw the ballfield to the right of the Hamilton Street route before glimpsing the park's boating lake. As the trolley moved toward the terminal on the double track parallel to the lake, it passed a shelter and refreshment stand. The trolley slowed as it passed a row-boating shelter and rental dock and then curved to the right into a dewdrop-shaped oval, in the middle of which were a lily pond moat and a floral island. There the car stopped and visitors stepped onto the terminal platform. "Cascade Park" was spelled out in a floral pattern on the side of the floral island facing the terminal. A boat landing to the immediate right of the terminal allowed small groups to embark on an electric excursion launch.

The terminal itself was a one-story, frame rectangular structure with two archways to the left and right of the center. The central portion had a spire that rose an extra story. There is evidence that at a later date an additional wing was added to the left portion of the terminal creating an "L"-shaped building.

Exiting from the building, the visitor came to Broadway Walk,

⁴ *Ibid.*, June 2, 1897.

⁵ *Ibid.*

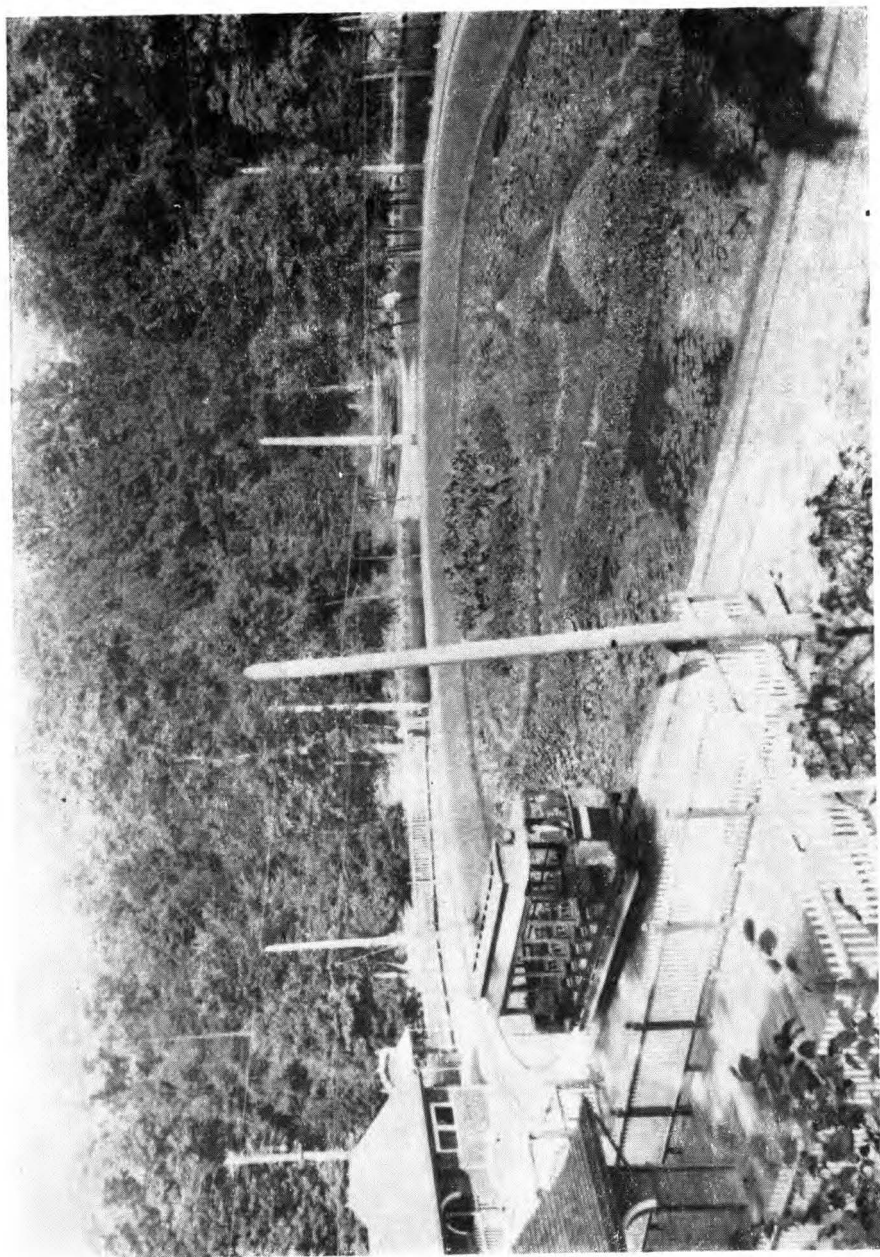
a wide path leading to the Floral Bridge. The Floral Bridge was built of wood flanked by stripped-bark logs set in tepee triangles to either side. To the left was the Swirl, where the waters of Big Run Creek came over a spillway and went into a winding bend, then into the boating lake. To the right was a wooden bridge leading to the picnic grove. The path continued to the Rustic Bridge over Big Run Creek leading to the upper park. To the left and above the path rose Cat Rocks, a high escarpment named for the number of wildcats early settlers found there. Its grandeur was visible from most of the lower park. On top of the rocks was a shelter house, not generally accessible from below.

Throughout the tree-shaded natural gorge which was the park's core were spectacular rock formations and a lovely forest. Winding its way through the gorge was Big Run Creek; the great waterfall at a high point of the gorge was said to be a miniature Horseshoe Falls. Every once in a while, someone who got down into the gorge followed it to the falls where behind and under them the cascading water had created a cave. Walking under the falls was an experience which focused attention on the rock salient holding the falling water. Above the falls were the old dam and the fish pond.

Although the spectacular scenery was a major attraction, the landscaping complemented the park's natural beauty. The Rustic Lodge, the Band Stand, and the open Dance Pavilion were favorite posing places for those lucky enough to have their pictures taken. Profuse plantings of flowers and well-manicured lawns highlighted the surroundings. All wood within the park was painted green, and the verdant environment added to the allure of the amusements, picnics, and trolley ride. At night, forty-five arc lights and many incandescent bulbs brightened the park.

Nearly everyone was delighted with the new park, but there were two sources of minor grumbling. First, the wealthier citizens with fine carriages spoke of the park's incompleteness, with ". . . no driveways in it, which means the exclusion of rigs altogether."⁶ No driveways were ever built, and all visitors were pedestrians. The second source of irritation was the liverymen, but for different reasons. There were fourteen livery barns in the city in 1897, and when asked about the effect of streetcars on the livery business, Samuel Chambers, a well-known liveryman, replied that they did not hurt trade much except on Sunday. Despite this reaction, there was talk of a syndicate

⁶ *Ibid.*, Apr. 28, 1897.



A view of Cascade Park at the trolley turnaround. Note the lily pond and the floral island, with the boating lake and electric launch in the background.



The Band Stand at Cascade Park

of liverymen buying land near the city for a summer resort "where nice drives will be a special feature."⁷

In 1898, the New Castle Traction Company turned out a picture brochure of Cascade Park printed by Shaw Brothers of Pittsburgh. In it company officers were listed: R. R. Quay, president; J. D. Cameron, vice-president; E. E. Hamilton, secretary and treasurer; and William Cummings, superintendent. It pictured the new terminal, the Floral Bridge, Zoological Gardens, Solitude Nook, Boiling Spring, Cat Rocks, the Band Stand, the Swirl, and the Mineral Spring. A large celebration, held on July 21, 22, and 23, featured a Spanish-American War theme with fireworks representing the Battle of Manila Bay lighting up the northwestern Pennsylvania sky.

Park visitors came by the hundreds on the trolley, paying the dime round-trip fare and the five-cent admission fee. Country folk came too. They drove their surreys to the Bukias farm and orchard where the horses were sure to be fed and watered. Late arrivals found no room in the barn, so they tied their rigs to an apple tree. The Traction Company at one point in the early 1900s erected a large wooden fence around the park perimeter, but it caused a loss of patronage and was later removed.

The earliest rides in the park were the electric merry-go-round and the electric launch. People at the turn of the century found dancing at the large Dance Pavilion and the free band concerts as entertaining as the moving rides. There were also the amusement booths where people threw balls at stationary targets, bought gifts and souvenirs, and purchased refreshing hokey pokey (ice cream). By 1908, a roller coaster had been added on the hill to the west of the Dance Pavilion; it was confined to the hillside, but its noise could be heard throughout the park. Later, in the 1920s, Billy Glenn, a peanut and popcorn vendor, turned amusement entrepreneur and built a swimming pool on the site of the old Zoological Gardens on the hill above the boating lake. He also built a new wooden roller coaster which ran throughout the Big Run gorge. A covered roller skating rink was built at a later date by the entranceway added near the mid-way on East Washington Street. Through the years, several moving and nonmoving amusements opened and closed.

The park's prosperity and popularity generally reflected New Castle's growth. In the early 1900s, the industrializing city boasted the largest tin-plate mill in the country. Immigrants flocked to the city

⁷ *Ibid.*

for its many job opportunities for unskilled workers. By 1909, New Castle had 38,000 people. That society was divided between "the establishment" and the newcomers is illustrated by some of the events at the park. The Old Timers Picnic was held annually starting in 1907; the "old timers" were residents or their families who could trace their connections with New Castle at least to 1860. The Thursday Night Club, limited to upper-crust, wealthy citizens, turned out regularly to enjoy music and dancing. But the newcomers and the older residents alike enjoyed bands, prize fights, speakers, and the general holiday atmosphere of a special outing provided by the park through the years. Free band concerts by Emery's Cascade Orchestra were held each Sunday.

By 1909, New Castle had twenty-five miles of electric railway with a total of fifty-two cars, and three interurbans and six railroads served the community. The trolley excursions from all over the Western Pennsylvania region were continued both by railroads and by interurbans. The Pittsburgh and Lake Erie Railroad brought visitors from Pittsburgh to New Castle's East Washington Street station, from which the Traction Company and its successors provided open streetcars to Cascade Park. Interurbans, like those operated by the Pittsburgh Railways Company, made Cascade Park accessible to thousands of Western Pennsylvanians.

With the advent of the private automobile, and especially with its increasing use after World War I, excursion attendance at Cascade Park began to dwindle. As trolleys declined, so did the use of the park as a picnic and outing destination and as an amusement center. But local patronage has kept it in marginal use up to the present, the key attraction being the expanded outdoor swimming pool built above the picnic groves.

Turn-of-the-century Cascade Park represented the recreational style of a different era, when people of nearly all classes began to have the leisure time to enjoy brief outings in bucolic settings. Readily accessible from urban areas via electric streetcars, trolley parks were a significant aspect of the social, cultural, and economic history of Western Pennsylvania.