All the Summers Were Golden: New Castle's Cascade Park

Southeast of New Castle, Pa., is a swath of land as rich and varied in history as the cultures of the nearby community. The land was once a hunting ground for Seneca and Lenne Lenape American Indians. As the region industrialized in the 1800s, it became a popular picnic spot. In this century, it grew into a thriving amusement park. In recent years, it has reverted to a more natural state as a city-owned recreational area filled with flowers, a restored carousel building, and three

Beverly Zona is Executive Director of the Lawrence County Historical Society

by Beverly Zona
swimming pools. So bucolic a setting deceives modern-day visitors into thinking that few passed here before, but the story of Cascade Park is one of savvy businessmen and colorful characters; it's left a legacy of great riches, and often, opportunities lost.

Cascade Park's crystal clear waterfalls, angular rimrocks, and acres of rich black soil were created 20,000 years ago when the Wisconsin Glacier forged a path across North America. The area was surveyed and parceled out in 1783 as payment to the soldiers who fought in the American Revolution. The Cascade Park site was part of Tract 7 of the First District of Donation Lands; its most prominent feature was a stream called Big Run and a waterfall known as Big Run Falls. The 200 acres containing the falls were patented to Robert McWilliams. In 1816, McWilliams built a log grist mill at the falls on a natural run of country stone, and later added another run of stone for a frame mill and a sawmill. He also dammed the water below the falls, obtaining an endless supply of power. (Today, nothing remains of his mills.)

The borough of New Castle was a growing town by this time, and business was good for McWilliams. Farmers came from miles around to wash their sheep under the falls, and Big Run was a great fishing spot and popular swimming hole. Many couples and families would pack a picnic lunch and arrive by foot or buggy to spend the day along the cool stream.

The land passed through many hands and was divided along the way until Colonel Levi C. Brinton bought 70.9 acres in 1891 for $3,000 -- 65 acres plus 5.9 acres subject to the right-of-way conveyed to the Pittsburg and Western Railroad Co. by the previous owner. Brinton became the fortunate owner of crystal clear streams, magnificent waterfalls, myriad of rimrocks, and lush thickets of hemlock and spruce.

Brinton, a Civil War veteran and local entrepreneur, changed the name of Big Run Falls to Brinton Park, then cleared part of the land and introduced amusements and a dancing platform. But the most popular ride, by far, was the canvas-topped, steam-operated merry-go-round, as recalled by visitor Clifford Vance:

As a small boy in 1894, I can remember going to Sunday School picnics at Brinton Park. We all loaded into bandwagons which started from the Second United Presbyterian [the old church on Pittsburgh street]. There were no streetcars to the park in those days. I can recall the old steam merry-go-round then in use for the picnics. We had a lot of fun.

The popularity of the park grew rapidly, but not fast enough for Colonel Brinton, who decided to build a streetcar line from downtown New Castle to the park. However, he neglected to get permission from the New Castle Electric Street Railway Co., which owned the city franchise for streetcars. After Brinton invested a considerable amount of money, he was forced to abandon the project and remove the track he had already laid. Overextended and deeply in debt, he deeded the park property to his wife, Anna, to protect his interest.

In 1897, Arthur Kennedy of Allegheny City and Richard and Elizabeth Quay of Sewickley purchased the almost 71 acres and the few amusements for $15,000. Richard Quay, son of Mathew Quay, the powerful and controversial U.S. senator from Pennsylvania, once told the Philadelphia-North American newspaper, “I’m out to make money…” His motto was, “Put money in my purse.”

On March 25, 1897, soon after the Kennedy and Quay land purchase, a story in the New Castle News announced the sale of Brinton Park to the New Castle Traction Co. for $46,000:

- to open a streetcar line on the water level from Long Avenue via Hamilton Street. It will proceed to Brinton Park where it will connect with Pittsburgh Street [now East Washington Street] and form a loop back to New Castle. In addition they intend to make Brinton Park the finest in the country.

In fact, Quay and Kennedy had incorporated New Castle Traction only a few months before they bought Brinton Park, so they “sold” the property to their own company. Quay served as president and Kennedy vice-president of not only the traction company, but also their New Castle Electric Co., New Castle Land Co., and the Lawrence Gas Co.

The traction company made the national news a year later when Richard Quay, his father Mathew, and former state treasurer Benjamin J. Haywood from Mercer County were arrested for conspiracy to misuse the funds of the Commonwealth. The matter came to light when the cashier of the Peoples Bank of Philadelphia committed suicide; papers in his desk indicated that a deposit of $600,000 in state funds was used by the three suspects for speculation. The Quays were acquitted when their lawyer argued that Richard had borrowed money from the bank to build the traction company, and his father had just co-signed the notes. Haywood died before he came to trial.

Throughout the country, the trolley business was brisk six days a week as people went to work or downtown shopping, but Sundays and evenings were slow. Streetcar companies responded by developing amusement parks, or trolley parks as they were called, at the end of the lines to boost ridership. Quay and Kennedy were in the enviable position of owning all the necessary assets — trolleys, land, and the electric utility to serve the rides.
Previous spread: Cascade Park's zoo was replaced in the 1920s with this swimming pool and slide; left, park superintendent Don McKibben surrounded by a Cracker Jack-littered floor, about 1900. Above, looking down the trolley line from the Cascade Park station.
The arrangement for power was to charge the trolley company a fixed rate for electricity (as was commonly done), meaning that every nickel that clinked into the fare box on Sundays and evenings was clear profit, with no extra charge to power the rides. And since the trolley line owners also owned the electric utility, they were just purchasing power from themselves.

The traction company built its line from the park to the south end of New Castle, which was growing at three times the rate of the rest of the city due to the influx of immigrants to the tin and steel industries. (The park was 2 miles southeast of downtown.) The laying of new track and the carving of a large hill was quite an engineering feat for that time, and several workers were killed by landslides during construction of the roadbed. Safety guidelines were enacted but were ineffective, and more died before the line was completed.

True to its word, the traction company spared no expense for its remodelled park. Frank Blaisdell, a well-known landscape
architect of the day, was hired to redesign the amusement park to complement the natural beauty of the land. This included a new dam to create a 15-acre lake for boating and swimming, or for ice skating in the winter.

A beautiful new park needed a name; according to the *Lawrence Courant-Guardian*, Miss Edwina Norris won a “name the park” contest sponsored by the paper.\(^\text{13}\) She chose “Cascade Park” because of the many waterfalls. Her prize — $10.

Work was quickly completed, and Cascade Park opened May 29, 1897; crowds flocked to enjoy the new lake, rustic bridges over Big Run, and rows of flowers. There was also a summer theater for vaudeville, a tintype gallery, a picnic grove, a lovers lane (a walkway), a roller coaster, bumper cars, and the ever-popular merry-go-round. And it got better! In a circular building with white pillars, the Citizens Band held concerts. Where the swimming pool now stands, there was a small zoo, and a ball field and a dance pavilion (which also survives) were added the following year.\(^\text{14}\)

With no television, movies, or radios, the appeal of a picnic in a shady grove after working all week, plus the novelty of music and the thrill of rides, made a Sunday excursion irresistible. Every year, amusements were improved, and every year, more out-of-towners came to New Castle by train. Whole families rushed from the railroad station to the open-air streetcars where there would be a mad scramble for seats, as recalled by Zerita McGuire:

> When I was a young girl growing up in Canton, Ohio, we would come to New Castle to visit my aunt. At that time, ladies had Kensingtions (social clubs) and we would meet in front of Brown and Hamilton’s store on East Washington Street after church on Sundays and catch the open air streetcar to the park. After we would get on the car, the man would come down the right and collect our fare.\(^\text{15}\)

By 1903, visitors came from clubs and church groups all over eastern Ohio, West Virginia, and Western Pennsylvania, including Pittsburgh’s Heinz Co. Crowds filled the ballpark to see the New Castle’s Cascade Park.
Castle Quakers and later the New Castle Knocks of the Ohio-Penn League. In 1910, well-known evangelist (and former professional ballplayer) Billy Sunday spoke at the park, then played in a game scheduled that day between the ministers and the laymen. (The laymen won 6 to 4.) Unfortunately, African Americans were restricted from enjoying Cascade Park except on Sundays; de facto segregation lasted until the 1950s. Willis Lash later recalled,

The church Sunday school would run excursions to Cascade Park. We'd go out on the trolley — it was open air — you'd stand on the running board. Then there'd be a dance, the schottische (a round dance resembling a polka). All of the white people would stand and watch us. Not the fancy dancing they do now, but a kind of a drill dance. You'd meet your girlfriend at Cascade Park.15

As World War I ended in 1918, the park was changing. The New Castle Traction Co. had been absorbed by the Penn-Ohio Electric Co. More families owned automobiles, too, so fewer rode the trolleys. As a side effect of the automotive age, the old roller coaster was torn down and replaced by a parking lot, and in 1923, the old carousel building (built in 1897) was replaced with a newer version.

The old Dodge 'M' bumper cars were still there, fine food was still being served at the restaurant, and that summer, Billy Glenn and his famous popcorn wagon moved from downtown New Castle to the park for the summer. Always energetic and enterprising, Billy decided to expand — he leased part of the park and installed a swimming pool and bathhouse where the former zoo had stood. Vaudeville was dying, so Billy tore down the summer theater and put in a fun house.18 But Billy Glenn's supreme creation was a new roller coaster. Taking advantage of the natural beauty the mighty Wisconsin Glacier had left behind, "The Gorge" plunged riders down into the valley and then up through the trees for a full view of the park landscape. It then swooped back into the gorge and up again.19

For years, summer houses had dotted the hills and valleys surrounding the park. Unknown to many Gorge riders, Billy Glenn and his family owned a cave-style summer home directly under the tracks. According to Maxine Glenn, Billy's daughter, "the cars came in boom — boom — boom over their roof, but they didn't mind because they knew they were making money."20

In 1930, Cascade Park was still growing and promising better attractions, but the Great Depression changed those plans. When U.S. Steel left New Castle in 1931, many banks closed and people lost their homes. While an evening at Cascade Park did not cost much money, it was more than most people had to spare, and the park began declining. By 1932, the Penn Power Division of Penn Ohio Electric had lost $25,000 at Cascade.21 In 1934, the company offered the park to the city for $1; thus, Cascade became a part of the New Castle public parks system, to be used forever as a city park.22

As the country pulled out of the Depression, the Big Band era blossomed. B.J. Biondi, a well-known musician and alderman, managed the Cascade dance pavilion for the city, bringing big name bands to the newly named "Rainbow Terrace." Paul
The KKK gained numbers in New Castle with the arrival of Italian and Syrian immigrants who worked in the tin mills. This group enjoyed a basket picnic at Cascade Park about 1930.

Whiteman, Ray Pearl, and Ted White were among the biggest, but most people danced to local groups such as Ted Marlin’s Melody Monarchs, the Keystone Serenaders, or Johnny Dachko’s polkas. Musician Jack Treser recalled,

I played at Cascade Park with the Keystone Serenaders, a group led by Francis Hammond in the ’30s and ’40s... We were a popular group, large by today’s standards, 10 men, including Harry Hammond, Johnny Bonfield, Lee Ciazza, and Al Jenkins.23

During World War II, as in the previous war, the park was a place to forget cares. As part of the city recreation program, Mayor John Haven began a weekly dance in the 1940s called Swing Lobby, under the supervision of Lieutenant Cecil Suber. In the winter months, the kids danced at City Hall, but every summer they moved to Rainbow Terrace. The old pavilion really jumped — at times there would be as many as 500 teenagers dancing to Maurice Spitany and his Tap Time orchestra or records spun by Vic Wagner.24 These days, Swing Lobby reunions are held every Thanksgiving weekend: former residents travel from all over the United States to dance to their favorite oldies.

Despite all the activities, the park was still not turning a profit, or even breaking even. From 1934 through the summer of 1944, the city lost $69,000 at Cascade.25 Something had to be done.

In the early 1950s, Paul Vesco, who owned a music store in New Castle, signed a lease with the city to manage the park. He advertised “a new look”: new rides were installed, including a
refurbished coaster in the gorge renamed The Comet. The framework for the track was made from treated wood which fitted into the rustic theme of the park; it rattled and shook just enough to give you the thrill of dipping down in the valley and flying up through the treetops.26 The park also boasted new auto scooters, a revamped Tumble Bug, five kiddie rides, miniature golf, and a skee-ball concession. The wooden carousel horses and original band organ also were replaced; Vesco said at the time he was very proud of his new merry-go-round, with metal animals four abreast.27

As the area recovered from the post-war recession, many companies such as Shenango China, United Engineering, Rockwell, and Johnson Bronze held their annual summer picnics at the park. To many citizens in the community, the '50s were the golden era of the park. As children, these New Castle natives had ridden on the scenic railroad and the little red fire truck. They had waded in the kiddie pool and gleefully waved to their parents from the carousel. As teenagers, they had rammed each other with the Dodge 'M cars, got whirled and whipped around on the Tumble Bug, played skee-ball, and rode on the swings and airplanes until they were sick. But as the park was still very much alive, the lake was slowly dying, gradually filling with 40,000 square feet of silt.28

Local jeweler Jack Gerson wanted the lake restored. As an immigrant boy, he had enjoyed swimming and boating there, and he felt all children should have the opportunity to have fun as he had. Gerson and Harry Mack of the Optimist Club made public appeals for funds to restore the lake. U.S. Congressman Frank Clark came into the effort and soon the Marines from a nearby flying up through the treetops.26 The park also boasted new auto base arrived with earth-moving equipment — by March 1957, they had cleared the lake to an average depth of 6 feet. The basin was filled with water and on May 3, 1958, the lake was re-stocked.29 Wayne Champ of West Pittsburg had the honor of catching the first fish that historic day.

In 1971, when Lake Arthur opened at nearby Moraine State Park, it seemed the bell had finally tolled for Cascade Park, but the park held on, as the short jaunt to Cascade was more appealing than the 15-mile drive to Moraine. The rides were a little decrepit, and the Comet could not provide the thrills found on more modern coasters, but Baby Boomers remembering the good times they'd had at the little park continued bringing their children. They introduced them to Italian ice and the world's greatest french fries — sprinkled with vinegar — and gathered around the wading pool with their toddlers. It was much safer than the huge Lake Arthur at Moraine.

Again, the park began to recuperate. It started with local square dancers who called themselves Paws 'n Taws. One rainy evening, they rented the dance pavilion for their weekly gathering, but when they arrived, they found more water inside the pavilion than outside.30 Jim Riggans, a member of Paws 'n Taws
and also a Rotarian, decided something had to be done to preserve the historic structure. Paws 'n Taws and the local Rotary spearheaded a drive to raise funds, and workers soon were installing a new roof to the 1898 building. Today it is one of the most popular spots in the park, and each Saturday during the summer, the city brings a Big Band group back to Rainbow Terrace: every summer the crowds grow larger.

In 1979, the city installed a new Olympic-size swimming pool and two new wading pools. Set among the trees and boulders on a natural plateau, it is a pleasant spot to spend a warm summer afternoon.

When Paul Vesco leased the park in the 1950s, he claimed he'd also purchased the amusements and five buildings. This came back to haunt the city. During the economic downturns of the 1960s and '70s, it became more difficult to make improvements and to keep the rides up to date. While the Paws 'n Taws and the Rotary Club were willing to restore the dance pavilion, and the city had received a grant to build the new pools, there was no ready cash to do more. In 1977, the city asked the county commissioners for help running the park but they were turned down. In June 1977, the rides were closed because Vesco had not paid the insurance. He was requesting a new 10-year lease as his would expire at the end of 1977, but the city was unwilling because Vesco was behind on payments from a previous lease and a judgement note. Surprisingly, this was worked out — a new lease was signed and the insurance was paid — but the situation still deteriorated. Someone stole the carousel horses and the restaurant burned down, then the dam broke again in 1981 and the lake was destroyed. Despite a public outcry, it has never been rebuilt.

In 1982, a tree fell over the coaster track and broke it in half. There were constant disagreements over rent and insurance. Vesco was told to have everything removed from the park by March 31, 1986. Numerous court injunctions and legal hassles ensued until by 1990, nothing remained of the amusement park except the carousel building and the dance pavilion. Gone were the Whip, Tumble Bug, swings, Dodge 'M, the coaster, and the arcade. Even the buildings were gone, burned by the city.

A year or so later, the Lawrence County Garden Club, together with the Cascade Park Restoration Committee, removed the blacktop from the old midway and planted grass. The famous floral steps were once again a colorful flourish of flowers; playground equipment was installed where the old Kiddieland once stood; the picnic grove was rejuvenated; and with the help of the Rotary Club, the empty carousel building was restored to its original lustre, and new courts were installed by the the Lawrence County Bocce Ball League. Cascade Park had come full circle, and was once again a lovely natural woodland.

Cascade Park has changed greatly over the years but has outlasted other regional parks — Idora, West View, Luna, Rock Point, and Nancy's Island. At its 100th birthday bash in 1997, New Castle Mayor Tim Fulkerson and U. S. Congressman Ron Klink cut a ribbon to re-christen the park. Music was provided by the U.S. Marine Corps Band and bands from the local high schools,
Regional amusement park fan and historian Paul Korol snapped these shots of Cascade in 1984, just after the park had closed for good.
plus Westminster College, the Lawrence County Historical Society, and students from New Castle High School performed one-act plays based on the historical society’s oral histories of the park. The historical society also mounted a park exhibit at the Joseph A. Clavelli History Center in New Castle.

All summer long there were festivities at the park. In addition to the renowned “Back to the ’50s” on the Fourth of July weekend, there was a gigantic fireworks display, appropriate for New Castle, called “The Fireworks Capital of America” for its many manufacturers. It was a tribute to the city’s heritage — but most of all to the history and grandeur of Cascade Park.

Notes
For more on the park’s early history, see Cohen, Arthur H., “The Trolley and New Castle’s Cascade Park, 1897” Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine 61:2 (April, 1978).
1 Lawrence County Warranty Atlas (Philadelphia, 1909).
2 Durant, L. History of Lawrence County, 1877 (Philadelphia, 1877).
3 Miscellaneous items in New Castle News, c. 1880s.
8 Lawrence County Deed Book, Vol. 76:153.
9 The Philadelphia-North American, June 1, 1902: 3.

Billy Glenn and his popcorn wagon.

12 New Castle News, May 24, 1897.
14 Building and equipment list, property transfer from Penn Power (formerly New Castle Traction Co.) to City of New Castle, 1934.
18 Penn Power operating records, Cascade Park, Appendix II, Leases, 1925.
19 Ibid.
21 Penn Power operating records, Appendix III, 1932.
27 Ibid.
35 Plaque on new courts