



On hot summer days, riders of all ages enjoy a refreshing dip at the West Virginia Logging Company, a log flume ride at Camden Park.

CAMDEN PARK | Courtesy photos

A retro summer at Camden Park

Only amusement park in W.Va. rolls out new season of vintage attractions

By JAMES E. CASTO
For Daily Mail WV

Young children marvel at their first visit. Their older brothers and sisters are thrilled to be back again. (“Am I big enough to ride the Big Dipper this year?”) And walking the Midway can take their parents and grandparents down memory lane as they recall hot summer days filled with fun rides and cotton candy.

On Saturday, May 22, Camden Park is set to welcome fun seekers for its 118th summer since it was established in 1903.

The historic family-run park, West Virginia’s only amusement park, is located on U.S. 60 five miles west of Huntington. A jumbo sign showing a smiling clown marks the park’s entrance and is hard to miss even if you’re a first-time visitor.

The 26-acre park has more than two dozen major rides and attractions, including a carousel that dates to the park’s earliest days, a popular Haunted House ride and the Big Dipper, a vintage-1958 wooden roller coaster that attracts die-hard coaster fans from all over the country.

Ordinarily, the park opens its season in May. But last year the COVID-19 pandemic delayed the park’s opening day until July 1. When it opened, masks were not required but were encouraged, as was social distancing. Sanitizing stations were installed at multiple locations on the grounds.

Owner-manager Jack Boylin said the same precautions will be in place this season.

“Attendance was really light when we first opened up last year,” Boylin said. “We had our worst July ever, but as the summer wore on attendance steadily picked up. We ended up with one of our best Octobers ever. We’re hoping this year’s season will be a good one — if the rain will just stay away.”

Trolley park beginnings

Camden Park originated as a “trolley park.” By the end of



Camden Park’s antique carousel was the first ride installed at the park. The current horses are replicas of the original wooden ones.



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The park’s vintage Haunted House takes riders along dark, winding corridors that feature sudden and unexpected lights and noises, luminescent images and animated props.

the 19th century, most towns had streetcar lines, and many of those opened picnic groves along their routes to boost summer-time traffic on weekends and holidays. That’s what prompted U.S. Sen. Johnson M. Camden, the principal stockholder in the local trolley line, the Camden Interstate Rail-

way, to establish Camden Park.

A 1919 estimate put the nation’s number of trolley parks at more than 1,500. Today, almost all of them have long since vanished. The very few that are still open have been able to succeed because, like Camden Park, they grew from picnic groves into full-fledged

amusement parks.

The streetcar line hired Col. E.G. Via as Camden Park’s manager when it opened in 1903. Via bought the park in 1916 and ran it until his death in 1946. Jack Boylin’s grandfather, Huntington furniture

SEE CAMDEN, 7A

Trolley parks: A bygone era of entertainment

By JAMES E. CASTO
For Daily Mail WV

Before today’s giant theme parks with elaborate rides named for cartoons, movies and superheroes, there were trolley parks.

The parks were built by trolley companies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a way to get workers and their families to ride the trolleys on weekends and holidays. At first they were simple picnic groves, but most later added carousels, other rides and live entertainment.

By 1919, just after World War I, there were more than 1,500 amusement parks around the country, and most of them were trolley parks, according to the National Amusement Park Historical Association. But as autos replaced trolleys, the streetcars and their parks faded away.

Today, the association says, only 11 of the nation’s trolley parks remain in operation. Camden Park in Huntington, West Virginia’s only operating amusement park, is one of them.

But West Virginia once had a number of other trolley parks, all of them long closed. Here’s a look at a few of them:

Rock Springs Park

Rock Springs Park was an amusement park located at Chester, in Hancock County, at the tip of West Virginia’s Northern Panhandle. While its lush valley of shade trees and cool springs attracted picnickers as early as the 1880s, Rock Springs was opened as a commercial park in May 1897.

Like many other parks, its development was connected to the street car system. A new bridge over the Ohio River had opened a few months before, carrying a trolley line directly to the park’s entrance. During the next decade, developers J. E. McDonald and C. A. Smith made the park a regional showcase.

In its peak years, Rock Springs employed 350 workers and had daily attendances as high as 20,000. Popular rides were the Old Mill, Shoot-the-Chutes and the Scenic Railway. Fun seekers could also swim, boat, stroll the gardens, see a stage production, visit the zoo or dance in the casino.

By the 1950s, the park was vastly reduced in size and grandeur, but continued to operate until 1970 when the rerouting of U.S. Route 30 began. The rerouting would take the highway straight through the old park. All the buildings were sold at public auction in 1974 to make way for the rerouted road and a new Ohio River bridge that replaced the old Chester bridge that once brought in thousands of park patrons.

Luna Park

Luna Park, a trolley park served by the Charleston Interurban Railway Company, was built in 1912 on the north bank of the Kanawha River.

At the park’s main entrance on Park Avenue stood a large, wooden fence with two flag-topped spires. Behind the fence, a footbridge led to level ground where park-goers could ride the Royal Giant Dips Coaster, a merry-go-round and Ferris wheel. Visitors could play games of chance and skill on the midway and picnic under shade trees.

Other park attractions included a zoo, skating rink, boxing ring and dance pavilion. Special

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Your ticket to summer amusement can be found right here in W.Va. at the historic Camden Park.