

Quassy A New England – If Not A National - Treasure

MIDDLEBURY, Conn. – The electrified rail line that once weaved its way through the wooded hills of this quiet borough in northwestern Connecticut has been gone for more than 80 years.

Even though 1930 spelled the end of the line for the Connecticut Trolley Company, its most popular summer stop, one that filled the rail cars to capacity, lives on.

Quassy Amusement & Waterpark is nothing short of a New England - if not a national - treasure. It has beaten the odds on many an occasion to proudly proclaim the title of “survivor” in an industry that has seen hundreds of similar facilities fade away.

Quassy is one of only 11 remaining “trolley parks” in the United States today, according to the National Amusement Park Historical Association. There were more than 1,000 such properties – parks owned and operated by electrified rail lines - prior to The Great Depression of 1929. Most of those parks fell victim to the depression and the lean years of World War II that followed.

The 20-acre lakeside facility marked a monumental milestone in 2008 by celebrating its centennial. Not only has the park been in operation now for 107 years, but for the past 78 seasons it has been owned by members of the same family.

About The Name

Like many other parks of the era, Quassy’s luring features when it opened in 1908 included a picnic grove offering bathing in sparkling Lake Quassapaug, boating and dancing. For years the facility was known as Lake Quassapaug – Quassapaug a Native American term meaning “big pond” or “rock pond.”

The locals started calling the park simply “Quassy” decades ago and the nickname stuck, though you will hear an occasional old-timer strolling through the property still referring to it as “Lake Quassapaug.” Even park letterhead dated as recent as 1983 carried the title Lake Quassapaug Amusement Park while the former arched gate leading into facility at the time said “Quassy” on its façade.

Trolley rides from nearby Waterbury, a city once known for the manufacture of brassware, watches and clocks, were 15 cents during those startup years, scrapbook newspaper ads reveal. A carousel was soon added at the park as was a dance pavilion in 1910.

A much larger open-air dance hall was built in 1915 on the lower level of the sloping property, and by the 1920s the park hosted bands in the building seven nights a week during the height of the summer.

Today the gigantic pavilion – the oldest building at the facility – houses a redemption arcade with its unique architecture intact.

End Of The Trolley

In the late 1920s major improvements were made to the road (Route 64) leading to the lake and park-goers soon found buses making the trip to and from Quassy much faster than riding the rails. By 1930 the trolley line had ceased operation, according to newspaper accounts.

A new carousel roundhouse was constructed in 1927 near the dance hall and the E. Joy Morris menagerie carousel at the park was moved into the structure it would call home for the next 60 years.

The park limped along during The Great Depression while many similar businesses in the nation were shuttered for good.

A significant change in ownership occurred in 1937 when three of the park's concessionaires, John Frantzis, George Terezakis and Mike Leon, purchased the property.

It was during the sale that the classic Morris carousel nearly went up in flames.

"So the story goes, there was a dispute over the carousel being part of the purchase and the previous owner had the animals stacked up and ready to torch them when a deal was finally struck," George Frantzis II, a current owner for the park, said of the negotiations involving his late grandfather.

The carousel and the park survived more turbulent years during World War II. Quassy did not open on Memorial Day in 1943 due to a ban on pleasure travel during the height of the war, but did operate during summer months.

Into A New Era

World War II drew to a close in 1945 and Quassy promoted new rides for the 1946 season. A new clambake pavilion and more rides were added in '48 as the property was being transformed into a traditional family amusement venue.

In the years to come, the Frantzis family gradually acquired more interest in the park as the other partners started to relinquish their shares.

What was said to be the first complete kiddieland purchased from the Allan Herschell Co. of North Tonawanda, N.Y. was installed at Quassy in 1952. The four-ride package consisted of a "Little Dipper" roller coaster, "Sky Fighter" jets, boats and pony carts.

All of the rides except the pony carts continue to entertain youngsters after more than 60 years of service at Quassy. The Herschell company was also known worldwide for the manufacture of carousels and at one time produced 100 annually.

The Morris carousel operated until 1989, when the owners decided it was time to retire the aging machine. An October auction was scheduled and brought national attention to the park as the classic ride was sold piece by piece.

Selected menagerie figures fetched more than \$40,000 each and when the gavel struck for the final time the carousel auction had raised more than \$630,000. The proceeds allowed the park to order a new 50-foot grand carousel for the coming year from Chance Rides of Wichita, Kan. At the time Chance also owned the former Allan Herschell Co. and was building carousels based on the original Herschell blueprints.

The new ride was installed in March of 1999 and the inner three rows of resin-molded horses are replicas from the Allan Herschell line.

Today a plaque in the roundhouse honors the late George J. Frantzis (1927-1997) for his more than 50 years of commitment to the park and the community.

Quassy Sweethearts

Through the years thousands of local and area teenagers have found summer employment as well as lifelong sweethearts at Quassy Amusement Park. Many couples who met at Quassy have returned to the park with their children and grandchildren, reflecting on and reliving some cherished memories.

It's commonplace to hear adults reminiscing about their childhood years at Quassy as they stroll park – many thankful that the property is still functioning as a place where happy memories are carved out.

Mixing The Old And The New

The face of Quassy Amusement Park has relatively remained the same over the years, still offering the laid back atmosphere of the traditional facility that was the cornerstone of its foundation.

With the advent of large theme parks over the past few decades – numerous ones within driving distance from western Connecticut – Quassy has managed to maintain its identity as the alternative to the mega facilities.

Rarely are there long lines for any of the rides, nor a crush of humanity streaming down the walkways at this quaint lakeside venue.

Pricing has also been an ally to Quassy as it does not charge a general admission to the property, allowing parents and grandparents alike to be spectators while the children ride classics like the Sellner “Tilt-A-Whirl” and Hrubetz “Paratrooper.”

And over the years Friday nights have become a “non-advertised” family event as Quassy's rides are only 50 cents each.

“Everyone knows Fridays are 50-cent nights at Quassy,” noted John Frantzis, now the patriarch of the business his father purchased more than 70 years ago. Hot dogs and small sodas (Pepsi) are also 50 cents during the Friday special. Up to 4,000 hot dogs will be served on a busy Fright night in July and August.

Yet Quassy, while preserving its treasured past, has kept up with the times by mixing the old with the new.

A portion of the lower parking lot near the lake has been transformed into a new development for the venue in recent years with the addition of larger rides like the Chance “Music Fest,” and “Yo-Yo,” along with “Bumper Cars.”

Time To Take The Plunge

While other large parks in the region started adding water attractions a number of years ago, Quassy quietly trudged along the path it had forged for itself as an “iron” (ride) park.

But the customer base it had drawn upon for decades was starting to shift to facilities offering the latest in water attractions, leaving Quassy pretty much high and dry on hot summer days.

“Our beach used to be packed, and it got to the point where fewer and fewer people were coming to the lake to swim,” John Frantzis noted.

With younger members of the family stepping into key management positions, the owners decided in 2003 that it was time to take a plunge by building a new water attraction.

That spring Quassy introduced “Saturation Station,” the first interactive family water play area of its type in the world. With cascading fountains, water cannons, waterslides and a huge tipping bucket as a centerpiece, the multi-tiered attraction was an overnight success.

“I believe it saved the park,” John Frantzis said. He attributes the project's inception and success to his son-in-law, Eric Anderson, who also heads up the park's operations.

Use of the state-of-the-art family waterpark is included in the price of an all-day park wristband and season passes. Building off the success of “Saturation Station,” Quassy added two gigantic “Tunnel Twister” waterslides to the attraction in 2006.

For 2013, the waterpark virtually doubled in size with the addition of three new slides plus a children's splash pad. The attraction was also renamed "Splash Away Bay."

Now as the temperatures soar in July and August, so does the attendance at Quassy's re-born lakefront attractions, proving that the largest gamble and investment in the park's history has paid dividends. The park also rebranded itself in 2013 as Quassy Amusement & Waterpark.

In 2010 the park added another new family attraction, the "Free Fall 'N'" drop tower. The "Wooden Warrior" roller coaster made its debut in 2011 and has received many accolades from coaster and theme park enthusiasts.

The 2015 season ushered in two new rides: "FRANTIC," a pendulum ride which does a series of 360-degree flips, and kiddie bumper cars.

In The Community

The park continues to be aggressively active in the communities it serves by hosting special events and activities for civic groups as well as "Town Days" for local residents.

One of the longest running community service campaigns at Quassy are Campership Fund Weekends to help send underprivileged children to summer camp. The fundraiser has been going on – well – longer than anyone at the park can remember.

And in 2003 the International Association of Amusement Parks & Attractions (IAAPA) honored the park with the Best Promotion of the Year award for an outdoor laser light show Quassy staged to benefit the Connecticut Food Bank. Quassy also received "The Spirit of Connecticut" award for its community efforts that year, including a "3-D" Fireworks presentation with Prevent Blindness Tri-State as the beneficiary.

Schools have also benefited from the park's array of new educational programs that include guided tours, structured workshops, an annual school music festival and a number of art contests.

Having survived the first 100 years was certainly challenging at times, but Quassy Amusement & Waterpark seems poised to charge into its second century on the tide of its recent successes.

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With sidebar "A Quassy Chronology"

OCTOPUS RIDE – Quassy Amusement Park started to expand following World War II and added this Octopus ride in 1948. (Quassy file photo)

Editors: If you require more historic park photos, please e-mail Ron Gustafson with your request

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