

## Amusement Park Dismantled

# Last Ride at Walled Lake

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It was the end of the ride, out at Walled Lake Amusement Park in southwestern Oakland County.

The end of all the rides. The Flying Dragon, the Pretzel, the Tilt-a-Wheel, the Rocket Ride.

But for one ride, at least, there's a last-ditch reprieve.

After 40 years, time ran out last week for the park that once was the favorite spot of Detroit's young people.

It was way out in distance in the days before freeways, and [illegible]don of its rides.

THE LAKE added a lot, with fast motorboat rides from the park's big pier. And swimming -- it was the first beach west of the Detroit River.

Then there was the gay Walled Lake Casino. All the name bands played Walled Lake. Red Nichols and the Dorsey Brothers, Les Brown, Harry James and Vaughn Monroe, Lawrence Welk.

Next door was the Casino Restaurant, where the "way-out" crowd ate. On the beaten path between the doorways those who dined and danced passed those who danced and dined.

The casino carried on until three years ago, the last area showplace for the big bands. It burned in style after a Saturday night dance. The cafe went in another fire a few months later.

The amusement park kept itself going, right through this Labor Day, but its number was up. The property has been leased all these years for the park [illegible] no renewal of the lease. It's prime lakeside land for a housing project or building lots.

So the workmen mounted the Ferris Wheel's axle complex in the September afternoon sunlight and started dismantling it, bolt by bolt.

SOME OLD-TIMERS who stood around below made it clear that they came to bury the park, not to praise it. But they couldn't help talking.

They spoke of the legendary Frank W. Pearce, who started it off with the roller coaster. Pearce was, indeed, "Mr. Roller Coaster." He designed and built them for 50 years, 30 of them all over North America.

They remembered his "Trip Through the Clouds" at Riverview Park on East Jefferson at the

Belle Isle Bridge, the largest coaster in the world with a mile of track.

But Walled Lake was Pearce's own. He built the Flying Dragon for himself and he put his best into its 60-mile-an-hour dive, and no passenger ever forgot the ride.

As the old-timers chatted, Abe Olenick, who worked for the food concessionaire at Walled Lake and remembers the old days at Eastwood Park and Jefferson Beach, shook his head sadly over this last season.

"Cold in the spring, and then all that rain in what should have been the best months," he said.

John Hamlet, park superintendent for the last seven years, said he wasn't sure what he'd do now.

"SINCE I'VE BEEN here I've been offered three better jobs," he said, "but I just couldn't leave. It gets into your blood."

For awhile, the park was open only on weekends. The rest of the time it was the private preserve of Hamlet's four children.

Every night the children played hide and seek in the rides. They've been hoping for a miracle that would save the park from the wreckers.

The young man who joined the group at this point looked like a biology teacher. He was thin, wore glasses, and turned out to be, of all things, a biology teacher. Name of John Hayek, of the Flint Junior College faculty. But he brought that small reprieve.

Hayek carefully looked over the still-intact caterpillar ride, noted the safety inspection seal, got a price and promptly bought it.

What did that kind of caterpillar have to do with biology?

"It started nine years ago," Hayek grinned. "That's when I started collecting wooden animals."

THE ANIMALS, it turned out, were from a merry-go-round that went on the block in Hayek's native Toledo. They look fine in his recreation room.

Hayek went on to become an enthusiastic amusement park buff. Now he and a couple other buffs with regular jobs -- one is a police sergeant -- are building up their own park.

It's at Davison, near Flint, is called Sherwood Forest, and naturally has a Robin Hood theme. They add to it when they can.

"I used to visit Walled Lake as a kid," Hayek said. "The boats were running then, I've never forgotten it. When I heard the park was coming down I had to come and salvage something."

He walked over to the Spook House, smiling appreciatively at its garish posters, a

connoisseur's gleam in his eye.

Two old-timers strolled down a lane of empty booths deserted by their pitchmen, toward where the gondolas of the Airplane Whirl dangled against the background of the lake.

ONE OF THEM found a beat-up baseball in the grass and threw it for an imaginary Kewpie doll, laughing.

At the hub of the Ferris Wheel the workmen were balked temporarily by the stubbornness of metal. They considered it from all angles, then climbed down and went off in their truck for bigger tools.

The hub stayed there in the sunlight, bare steel against the sky.