

Chutes Park Offered Beachgoers Waves of Summer Fun

During 1907, Galveston termed its beachfront as “The Coney Island of the South.” Multitudes of excursionists visited Electric Park, which was now in its second season of operation on Seawall Boulevard. Chutes Park, Electric Park’s immediate neighbor, opened for the first time, making Galveston an even more desirable stop for excursionists.

Chutes Park was built in the spring of 1907 on leased property located in the northwest and southwest quadrants of Outlot 117. Its boundaries were Avenue Q ½ to the north, the Boulevard to the south, and 25th Street to the west. Seawall Amusement Company was owner and operator of Chutes Park. Moritz Brock, a local distributor for Anheuser Busch, was the company’s president Charles Niemeyer, who had been affiliated with Chutes Park in Chicago, managed the Galveston location.



Chutes Park’s improvements totaled \$30,000. Its structures were painted white to match those at Electric Park. Chutes Park advertised that it was the “Largest Amusement Park in the South.” It opened on Sunday, May 12, 1907, although its main attraction, the Mystic Rill, was not yet ready. Visitors enjoyed Katzenjammer Castle (named for a then popular comic strip, Katzenjammer Kids), the Palace of Wonders (an early movie theater located beneath the Flatiron Restaurant), and the City of Yesterday.

In conjunction with Electric Park, Chutes Park enhanced the beachfront’s attractiveness to visitors. According to the Galveston Tribune, May 11, 1907, “...in fact, the two parks will be the same as one great exposition, with a strong pull being made by both to give the people of Galveston and Texas a recreation second to none in the United States.” In June 1907, a visiting newspaper editor remarked during the Texas Press Association’s convention in Galveston: “As to amusements, Galveston is approaching the famous Coney Island and each season finds new

attractions added to appease the American's thirst for hazardous pastimes.”

Chutes Park's most dramatic attraction, the Mystic Rill, was a water ride. People sat in boats that plied a scenic waterway, traveling up an incline and concluding the ride with a shoot-the chutes. The course ran more than a thousand feet, snaking around Electric Park's Figure 8 and folding back on itself. The Mystic Rill cost \$15,000. Its opening was delayed by the need for a larger motor, which had to be brought in from out of state. The ride finally opened in the middle of June 1907, drawing several thousand people which required a police presence. People kept coming back to enjoy the Mystic Rill. In August 1908, the Galveston Tribune rhapsodized: “The mystic chutes is a joy forever.”

Chutes Park offered visitors many other attractions. The Edisonian Theater replaced the City of Yesterday in July 1907. The theater offered such presentations as “An Astronomer's Dream of the Other World.” Happy Land was a German garden that had food tables and offered vaudeville and refreshments. Illusion Theater hosted magic shows. The Palace of Wonders was an early motion picture theater. Its titles included “Arabian Dreamland,” “Dawn of the New World,” and “Burning of Rome.” Giggle Alley opened in 1908 and lasted until May 1912, when it was altered and moved.



*Chutes Park advertisement placed in the Galveston Daily News
June 17, 1908 (around the time of the park's opening)*

The attractions were regularly refreshed to draw repeat and new visitors. During 1907 and 1908, the Galveston Tribune reported almost daily on events at Chutes Park and Electric Park and occasionally included mention of visitor totals. The newspaper reported, for instance, on July 12, 1907, that most of the city's 8,000 visitors the evening before had patronized both amusement parks.

Chutes Park remained open until 11 pm nightly. On moonlit nights, it had a special allure. Thanks to illumination provided by thousands of light bulbs, Chutes Park and Electric Park sparkled during summer evenings. “By day, they are white, clean and spotless and by night a gorgeous mass of lights...a hodge-podge of sounds, some melodious, others somewhat discordant, but none entirely disagreeable, for they tell that something is doing ‘in the old town tonight.’”

At the end of October 1907, Chutes Park and Electric Park were heavily damaged in a storm. At Chutes Park, winds destroyed Katzenjammer Castle and damaged the Mystic Rill. In October 1908, Seawall Amusement Company failed to pay the franchise tax in operating Chutes Park. The Galveston City Commission authorized ending the company's franchise. Seawall Amusement Company, however, evidently remained in business. The 1909-1910 Galveston city directory listed it, and tax records recorded the firm as the owner of the amusement park's structures through 1910.

New attractions were planned for Chutes Park for the 1909 beach season, including Streets of Cairo, Whirling Dervishes, a Venetian theater, and a freak show. These, however, did not materialize. A minimal hurricane on July 21, 1909, had little effect on Chutes Park, although waves tore up the grounds and salt spray killed plantings. Most of the attractions, including the Mystic Rill, were torn down in the fall of 1910 to facilitate filling behind the Seawall. The few features that survived included Giggle Alley, which was altered and moved in 1912, and the Flat Iron Restaurant. Galveston would not see another water ride until the opening of Ye Old Mill along the Boulevard in the early 1920s.

Surviving records of the Galveston Insurance Board for Chutes Park kept in the Rosenberg Library's Galveston and Texas History Center call into question the safety of the park's attractions. The Insurance Board's inspector assessed wiring and fire risks of buildings in Galveston. The Description and Estimate for Happy land, June 30, 1908, records that it had unapproved electrical wiring, with "Over loaded circuits...Joints not soldered...Should be re-wired...Moving Picture Booth locked up at time of inspection." Another Description and Estimate for Giggle Alley, dated October 7, 1910, has the notation "Elect. Wiring not Standard."

Chutes Park nevertheless was a hit with local citizens and excursionists. Its varied attractions had intriguing and exotic names that were sure to capture the public's fancy. Regular updating took into account their degree of popularity and visitor interests. New, enticing attractions tantalized excursionists with mystical possibilities and the chance to see distant times and faraway places. Chutes Park's clientele came to expect the unexpected.

The Rosenberg Library seeks photographs and printed matter concerning Chutes Park, as well as other amusement parks in Galveston. Please contact Lauren Martino, Special Collection Manager, at lmartino@rosenberg-library.org.