

Electric Park Meant Electric Excitement for Galveston's Tourists

Galveston's Historic Pleasure Pier had its dramatic and highly publicized opening in the early summer of 2012. Its predecessor, Electric Park, operated briefly along Seawall Boulevard in the early 20th century. The Pleasure Pier provides fun for everyone; in contrast, Electric Park had an elitist appeal.



Electric Park, circa 1907, looking northeast. Carousel (left), aerial swing (left background), and Crab Pavilion (right)

Reserving the local beaches and seaside amusements for a better class of visitors was a local priority during the first years of the 20th century. The 1900 Storm had destroyed Galveston's beach boardwalk, which drew an unsavory crowd. In 1901, George Murdoch rebuilt his bathhouse along the beach and purchased property around it to prevent the return of a shabby Midway. Murdoch advocated bringing excursionists to Galveston. Electric Park, which opened five years later, was intended for genteel visitors. It would also further the island resort's aspiration to become the "Coney Island of the South."

Galveston looked to New York's Coney Island, home of Luna Park, Steeplechase Park, and Dreamland, for inspiration. On October 4, 1904, the *Galveston Daily News* announced a forthcoming local version of Dreamland. Galveston's amusements were to be served by weekend passenger-train excursions, drawings on the populations of Texas and surrounding states. Unlike its New York namesake, though, the attractions would meet the needs of persons of good character.



During September 1904, William A. Gardner, secretary of the Galveston Business League, made a high priority of bringing an amusement park, 'such as they have at Coney Island or Atlantic City' to give excursionists a reason to stay the night in Galveston. In January 1905, the *Galveston Daily News* quoted an unidentified Indiana businessman, who remarked on Galveston's needs, including an amusement park: 'If the right kind of site could be had on the beach front for an amusement park, you'd have no trouble whatever in getting the right kind of amusements to fill it.'



Electric Park at night, circa 1906.

The bandstand had the greatest longevity. In July 1911, it was moved close to 22nd Street along the Boulevard, becoming the site of open-air concerts. It was subsequently incorporated into Joyland Park, which operated in the vicinity between 1919 and 1928. Joyland Park was demolished in 1927 - 1928 to make land available for a hotel that was never built. Galveston was one of many locales across the nation to feature Electric Parks during the early twentieth century. These were so-called trolley parks, served by electric streetcars which brought excursionists. The *Galveston Tribune*, May 28, 1906, remarked that the amusement park would not only "furnish a fine pleasure ground for its own people, but be a magnet to draw greater crowds of excursionists from upstate than ever before."

Owned by Galveston Electric Park and Amusement Company, Electric Park was built on the northeast quadrant and the east part of the northwest quadrant of Outlot 117. According to a **Sanborn map** of the park preserved in the Rosenberg Library, Electric Park's boundaries were roughly Avenue Q (north), Seawall Boulevard (south), 23rd Street (east) and 24th Street (west). The amusement park's improvements totaled \$51,560. The Crab Pavilion, a common feature of many period postcards, became part of the amusement park. The pavilion, which stood at 23rd Street and Boulevard, had been built in 1905.

Electric Park opened in May 1906 with free admission. It enthralled visitors with the Electric Theater, an Aerial Swing 50 feet high, Hale's Tours of the World (an early form of motion picture), shooting galleries, and a roller coaster called the Figure Eight. The Cave of the Winds catered to those who descended in darkness as gusts of air blew on them. Six thousand lights provided "Gorgeous Electrical Illumination" that enabled guests to enjoy the attractions during summer evenings. Fireworks were an additional draw. Electric Park fulfilled the traditional role of an amusement park by offering its visitors a multisensory experience. Instead of being bystanders, people directly interacted with its rides and concessions. Sounds, motions, colors, and tastes — all of these stimulated the senses, heightened enjoyment and excitement. Electric Park's rides allowed visitors to experience thrills in a safe, controlled manner; as well, the rides made thrills repeatable.



Electric Park, circa 1907. Bandstand (middle), Carousel (behind bandstand), and Ferris wheel (right)

The Galveston Daily News, September 1, 1906, noted the amusement park's "numerous electric lights, the dizzy whirl of the wing, Figure 8, and the dozen and one attractions, all combined to give enjoyment to the visitors." Guests left their worries behind and spent an afternoon and evening, enjoying everything Electric Park offered. When they returned home, these individuals shared vivid memories with their friends, who found themselves tempted to visit the island resort.



Hale's Tours of the World at Electric Park. Looking northeast from Seawall Boulevard, circa 1906.

Amusement Park, which opened in May 1909 at 32nd and Seawall Boulevard. Electric Park's stay in Galveston was all too brief. In the fall of 1910, most of its buildings and attractions were demolished to facilitate filling behind the Seawall. Its remaining structures, including the Crab Pavilion and Carousel, were raised. The Carousel fell in the 1915 Storm. The heavily damaged Crab Pavilion was torn down in January 1916.

Today, memories of Electric Park survive through photographs, printed matter, a map, and newspaper articles preserved in the Rosenberg Library's Galveston and Texas History Center. The History Center (4th floor) is open Tuesdays - Saturdays, 9 am - 6 pm to the general public.

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In 1907, with no room to expand, Electric Park was rearranged, with the removal of some attractions and the installation of a Ferris wheel. School students throughout Galveston attended Electric Park's opening in May 1907. Chutes Park, another amusement park, opened just west of Electric Park along the Boulevard, providing additional thrills. In 1908, Electric Park gained the Ticker, which bounced riders around in cars traveling down an incline. No attractions were added in 1909. The popular Aerial Swing was moved to Surf