History of Gordon State Park

Special thanks to George Neargarder, who supplied the articles, images and expertise.

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Map of Gordon State Park

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GORDON STATE PARK – 1924 - 1933

By George Neargarder  September 6, 1994

Harold Neely organized the St. Marys Amusement Company in 1924 to build a amusement center on Grand Lake St. Marys. The park was named after Congressman Robert Gordon Jr. who donated thirteen acres of land to the state to start the development. It was located on the northwest corner of Grand Lake St. Marys, between the lake and State Route 364.

The swampy weedy land was first surveyed, and then work was begun to develop the ground. Soon roads and parking lots were built. Water, gas and electric lights were installed. A new pier was built, permanent concessions stands and rides were built. Trees and shrubs were planted to beautify the park.

A popular boardwalk was built, being about 30 feet wide, and seats with colored umbrella canopies were on the sides of the walk. A rail was on the walk at the water’s edge. When completed, the Gordon State Park cost $600,000.

A special railroad car ran from St. Marys to Gordon State Park on the Western Ohio Interurban System. It run from 10:00 am to 11:00 pm and stopped at the Quick Works (where Parker Hannifin is now located), which was a short walk distance to the park. There was always a large crowd, and people came from miles around to spend the day at the park. Out of town license plates were a common sight.

The park had a man handling special excursion for organizations and factory outings at Gordon Park, arranging games and sports for the day. A large athletic field was laid out for baseball games, foot races, horseshoe contests and etc. To care for the picnickers in all weather conditions, three picnic pavilions were built that could accommodate hundreds of people. Community kitchens were located at each end of the pavilions for the free use of picnickers. In this way, the visitors could enjoy their dinners in the open, and the amusement features, and listen to the music at the Dance Pavilion. On July 4 & 5, 1926, 45,000 people visited the park.

One of the hi-spots of the park was the Dance Pavilion better known as “The Pier” or “The Palace”. This was constructed at a cost of $65,000. The building was one of the largest in the state, approximately 50 x 300 feet, and could accommodate hundreds of people. The boardwalk was around “The Palace”, and there was an alcove for the band, and benches for onlookers along the sidelines.
The dance hall was as smooth as glass, and had beautiful lighting effects. They also sold a large variety of refreshments. Joe Kayser was the band director. His all-man band was one of the most popular in the country. One of the most popular tunes of the day was “If You Knew Suzie Like I Know Suzie”. In 1931 the Dance Palace, roller coaster and some concessions were completely destroyed by fire. The origin of that fire was never discovered. A smaller dance hall was rebuilt on the site, that later became a roller rink. On November 21, 1940 this building was destroyed by fire.

The concessions were owned, in the great part, by local people. Five or six lunch stands were scattered throughout the grounds. Some of the parks amusements were the Crazy House, Roller Coaster, Miniature Railroad, Pony Tracks, A sixty foot Ferris Wheel, Merry-go-round, Custer Cars, the Old Mill Coaster, the Merry-mix-up, and a Sea Plane. The Devil's Backbone Roller Coaster was built for $60,000, and was the second largest in Ohio. It was 90 feet high and 2500 feet long. It dropped at an angle that thrilled everyone. The miniature railroad began at the east side of the boardwalk and went west to the channel. It was operated by electric with the center rail being charged.

Many fond memories are connected with “The Mary Jane”. This colorful passenger boat carried forty persons and provided tours of the lake. Much pleasure was also derived from speed boat rides on the lake. The beach also was a favorite playground. You could slide on the large slides on the beach into the cool water, and play on the large water balls in the lake. Shells were found in large numbers on the beach and proved a satisfying souvenir for many visitors.

The Merchant's Community Picnic, the biggest community affair St. Marys and vicinity had ever had, was on June 10, 1926, at the park. Every store and factory in town was asked to close to permit their employees to join the celebration. The sun came out early in the morning - it was warm but not too hot. The Salem Township Band, the best for many miles around, marched out from St. Marys to the park. During the day, from 11 a.m. to 11 p.m., there were band contests, horseshoe pitching, free ice cream, a public wedding, Merchants Surprises (merchandise donated by the merchants for contest prizes), a picnic supper, dancing, and fireworks.
The highlight of the day was the wedding on the top of the Ferris wheel. Archie Cole, the trombone player in Joe Kayser’s band was to be married in the near future, so he agreed to have it on the day of the celebration. The bride, Katherine Clark, a native of Iowa, (this was her first trip east) planned the wedding to start at four o’clock. The wedding procession would start at “The Palace” at 3:45 and proceed to the Ferris wheel. The bride and groom, Mayor Neely, and the Justice of Peace. Dr. G. W. Raudabaugh sat in the top car. Dr. Raudabaugh read the ceremony and afterward the newlyweds held a reception at the night dance session. A huge four layer mountain cake was cut and samples given out until it was finished.

In the evening there was a magnificent fireworks display. Some of the most attractive design were the aerial salutes, floral bouquets, national streamer wheel, silver rain, blue eye Susan, floating jewels, spider land, weeping willow shell, The Mighty Niagara, and the American Flag.

Disaster in the form of two fires, one tornado and the Great Depression of the thirties along with the large overhead caused the park to cease operating by 1933. Today the park is gone but not forgotten by the people who remember the happy times that they enjoyed there.

Compiled September 6, 1994 by George Neargarder from news articles in the The Evening Leader, The St. Marys Story by Frank B. Shuffleton, and a Gordon State Park Report from Albert Kohler’s English Class in 1944 by Carolyn Schultze and Betty Chivington.
Wow! What a ride!
The first plunge could knock your socks off. By the end of all those 50 mph curves, the Devil's Backbone at Gordon State Park left riders breathless, but thrilled beyond imagination.
Completed in June of 1926 with 18 train carloads of lumber, the wooden roller coaster was either the fastest in Ohio possibly the whole country, or the second fastest depending on the speaker. But there was no question about Gordon Park itself, it was THE best for hundreds of miles in any direction.
Named for Robert Gordon Jr., a St. Marys native who served in state government and gave the land along the east bank to the state for a park, the amusement park itself was the brainchild of Harold Neely. It was Neely's father Lemon Neely who made a fortune in the St. Marys oil field.
St. Marys Mayor Harold Neely and his young son, Sonny, were the first to ride the roller coaster. The ride or device as amusement park rides were called in the early days, had first been tested carrying sand bags in the passenger cars. All was well so the Neelys jumped aboard. (The first woman to ride was Mrs. Geary Troxell.)

But the star in the Gordon Park crown was the Pavillon Dance Hall. It was the place to be, a meeting place for all the young singles and many married couples in the county and beyond.
“I danced there at the Pavillon many times,” recalls Lloyd Laut, 96-year-old New Bremen native. “I loved the Saxi Holtsworth Orchestra. And Harold Grunemeyer’s band from Piqua had a nice sound, too.
Saxi was a favorite with the locals. For several years he brought his New York City band for a few-weeks' engagement at Gordon Park. The late Evelyn Myers, herself having been selected as a Pink Slipper Girl at the Pavillon, recalled in The Evening Leader several years ago that Saxi played such tunes as “Pink elephants,” “A Precious Little Thing Called Love,” and “When My Baby Smiles at Me.”

The dancehall attracted other famous bandleaders of the time: Sammy Kay, Guiy Lombardo, Paul Whiteman and Peeewee Hunt

“There was no comparison,” Laut says, “Gordon Park was the best around — much better than at Indian Lake. It was clean and had such a nice atmosphere.”

Laut didn’t own a car in those years but he often made the trip from New Bremen to take part in the waltz competition on weekend nights. “My friend had about a 1919 Ford coup, a touring car, and we’ll start out for Gordon Park in that. Oh, it was quite a lovely time.”

“Once I placed second in the Waltz. My partner was a friend of my sister (Toots Blanke). She was a Frevert, Edna, I think. She went on to another partner and won first prize. I guess I wasn’t at top form that night.”

9/24/00 - FROM WALT BENSON

Robert Reed & Chas Millisor both took tickets for the roller coaster.

Chas Millisor also worked the roller coaster and sometimes he would find more coins under that board walk. Then he got paid for working.