Historian of early 20th century entertainment tells the story of the New England 'trolley park'

By R.W. Bacon

A few weeks ago NEPA Exchange editor John Wagner invited an article from me – your formerly contracted NEPA publication designer/editor. Whatever for? Over the past few years we had occasion to discuss my earlier (and sometimes parallel) career as a touring performing artist. For 25 years, my wife L.J. Newton and I performed throughout the U.S. (until her retirement in 1999) in our theatrical retrospective of American vaudeville and variety entertainment. In addition to our acrobatic juggling, comedy dance, and ragtime & jazz music-and-song, we were also historians of our various specialties.

Over the years, research subjects included the circus and variety performances presented in outdoor venues. Therefore, as an historian driven to clarify the "big picture," my choice of topic for a relevant article is the origin and evolution of the dozens of end-of-the-line "trolley parks" that sprung up in New England in the late 19th century. And as a performer who has been around the block in commercial showbusiness – including performances at many of these trolley parks in the late-20th century – I bring to this article observations of both the faded glory of some venues – and the timeless appeal of verdant leisure destinations.

Park professionals in New England know that the concept of the town green, or "common" grazing land, goes back to the earliest settlements. As population and building density increased, and settlements grew into cities and towns, these common areas became valued gathering places and green spaces. By the mid-19th century, when industrialization was rapidly reshaping the built environment as well as our way of life, pioneer landscape designers like Horace Cleveland (1814-1900) and Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903) were advancing their enlightened ideas of public parks. Their work was driven by an idealized purpose of creating green spaces that would afford citizens healthy respite from the drudgery of factory work.

Although trolley parks on the perimeter of town could be just as attractive as downtown public parks, the motivation to build them was profit, not social idealism. In the 1880s, electrified transit systems replaced horse-drawn trolleys in cities large and small. The traction companies, quite naturally, sought the highest return on their investment. Frustrated by paying a flat monthly fee for electricity, they explored every opportunity to increase ridership. One solution was to create a destination that would induce entire families to ride the trolley – and pay the fare – on Saturdays and Sundays. That destination was the company-owned, end-of-the line trolley park. These parks filled a market need: The well-to-do already had the means to enjoy more distant summer resort areas; now the city-dwelling working class would flock to pleasant parks on the outskirts that matched their means and desires.

Pictured above is the trolley stop at Hampton (N.H.) Beach. Just out of view to the left is the Hampton Beach Casino, built by the Exeter, Hampton, & Amesbury Street Railway Co. in 1899.

Most inland trolley parks in New England began as simple picnic groves, offering not much more than band concerts in a central gazebo. In the beginning, the ride to the park in a breezy open-air trolley on a hot summer day was an attraction in itself. Some of these trolley parks remained an oasis of relative calm. They went on to have their share of balloon ascensions, circus aerialists, and stage shows, and after trolley service ended, many later became public parks. Other trolley parks, relentlessly profit-driven, followed the lead of the Columbian Exposition of 1893 (the Chicago World's Fair, with the grounds designed by Olmsted himself …) and the successful model of Coney Island Park (1875) in Brooklyn, N.Y., both of which set the standard for escapist amusement. The traction companies expanded their parks to serve this popular taste while extracting every possible nickel from visitors. The larger trolley parks became full scale amusement parks featuring all manner of electrically-lit spectacle and diversion to go along with picnicing, boating, and outdoor sports: penny arcades, shooting galleries, ballrooms, vaudeville shows, band concerts, fireworks, carousels, Ferris wheels, and the latest and greatest thrill rides.

The impact of automobile mass-production (c. 1914) and the Great Depression of the 1930s combined to end the era of trolley transportation, and the same forces affected the trolley parks. While there were an estimated 1500 trolley parks in the U.S. in 1920, by the late 1930s the number was down to 400. Nevertheless, some parks sustained a vibrant life of their own for decades to come. But even for a great many of these survivors, scarcely a trace remains, as later social and market forces drove them out of business in the 1980s-90s. Today a handful of original New England trolley parks still serve a market niche as popular family attractions.

Across the U.S., there are reportedly 11 original, strictly-defined trolley parks still in operation, three of them in New England (Lake Compounce, Bristol, Conn.; Quassy Park, Middlebury, Conn.; and Canobie Lake Park, Salem, N.H.). Of the other 1400-plus parks from the 1920 count, some were divided into private residential or commercial ownership, some were taken over by public/private partnerships, some were recast as city/town parks, some were set aside as conservation land, some were demolished and abandoned, and some still mark the landscape with their decaying man-made remnants.

However one may feel about the unbridled avarice of the trolley companies or the supercharged ambience of an amusement park, the fact remains that many generations of long-lasting family memories were made at these parks. Even today there is considerable nostalgia for those that have recently closed. Beyond the rides, games, thrills, and food, human interaction between visitors, employees, and performers made a vital contribution to the experience. Generations of stellar performing artists shared their energies in live shows on outdoor stages and in well-appointed theatres, and their background is worthy of consideration.

Between 1880 and 1930, before the dominance of the Hollywood motion picture, live vaudeville entertainment was a staple of American leisure. Even the smallest cities had at least one theatre devoted to presenting an eight-act vaudeville program six days per week. By 1920, there were over 2000 vaudeville theatres in the U.S., and thousands of professional performers, traveling by rail, were needed to keep the vaudeville circuits churning out entertainment for the masses. This does not count the performers on smaller regional circuits, major circuses & wild west shows, small-time wagon circuses, showboats, medicine shows, chautauqua caravans, independent troupes, and traveling lecturers.

A typical vaudeville program included music & song, dance, comedy, a dramatic sketch, acrobatics, juggling, and a lecturer on a topic of current interest. It was vaudeville acts like these, at liberty between tour contracts, that filled the bill at the trolley park theatres. New

Crescent Park (1886-1979), Riverview, R.I., c. 1905.

England parks, thanks to proximity to New York, had access to first-class talent during the summer. Circus aerial acts were especially suited to the outdoor venues, and these acts were eager to fill in dates during their fringe seasons. The second tier of talent working New England vaudeville and parks were called "coast defenders" because they only worked the small New England cities and did not tour nationally. The Great Depression was the death blow to live vaudeville. Theatre managers found they could do better financially by presenting movies instead of dealing with more costly human labor.

Although vaudeville as an institution fizzled out in the 1930s, in the years after WWII variety entertainment was boosted by a flourishing nightclub scene, and performers found work plentiful. This was my father's heyday as an elegant sleight-of-hand artist – and big-band baritone. Variety performers of this era worked the stages and ballrooms of the largest parks. The giant ballrooms were venues for some of the biggest names in American jazz in the 1930s-1940s, including such immortals as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Benny Goodman.

During a long performing arts career, my wife and I toured far-and-wide, performing at the entire range of theatres, resorts, hotels, conventions, casinos, fairs, festivals, circuses, colleges, museums – and parks. Among the many agents we worked with were a number of hardened showbusiness veterans who had booked entertainment at major New England parks since the 1930s. Over the years they frequently offered us – at that time we were part of the newest generation of dazzling variety entertainment – engagements at a number of the remaining trolley parks. Frankly, they were not our favorite venues, but they added a certain richness to our experience, and a connection to an earlier era. (In retrospect, some of these special event bookings were probably part of management's deperate campaign to resuscitate a park in an irreversibly terminal state.)

One of these now-defunct parks was the setting for a situation that was both bizarre and laughable. Just minutes before a 7 p.m. show the stage manager at this not-to-be-named park informed us that a remote radio broadcast would be happening adjacent to the stage, and that the explicit directive from management was that both our show and the DJ were to begin at the same time. The DJ and

Savin Rock Park (1870-1966) in West Haven, Conn. had its own vaudeville theatre on park premises, part of the national Orpheum circuit.

The vaudeville stage at Salisbury (Mass.) Beach was built by the Salisbury Railroad in the 1890s.

I questioned the logic of this, but were instructed to carry on as directed. The standing-room-only audience was perplexed, annoyed, and finally amused at the confusing cacophony of signals from three simultaneously blaring sound systems – six speakers at the stage plus the tinny park-wide system. My wife and I soldiered on with our usual high energy, although we had already decided this would be our last show at this venue. Then, in the middle of the show, a bespectacled, oddly-dressed man about 40, looking lost, wandered on stage amidst our flying clubs, balls, daggers, and tennis racquets. He stammered to me earnestly as I gently escorted him to safety, but of course I could not hear him. I carefully guided him down the stairs at the side of the stage, and scanned the area briefly, hoping to spot his caretaker or escort. After the show we learned that this man was the park's general manager. Why did he walk out on stage in the middle of the show? "All I wanted to do was tell you that I couldn't hear you or your music," he said. No wonder the place went out of business.

The New England trolley parks had their day in those decades before the automobile intoxicated us all with the freedom of choice in recreational travel. While a few of the trolley parks remain as amusement parks, doing their best to adjust to ever-changing public taste, most of the original parks have morphed, by design of man or nature, into something else. Taking a broad view of the mission of parks and our relationship to our natural surroundings, it is comforting to note that so many of the original trolley parks have either become publicly-owned, program-filled parks, or protected conservation lands used for passive recreation. As such they remain today as valued destinations – oases of nature, leisure, recreation, amusement, and renewal.

About the author: *R.W. Bacon is an all-but-retired acrobatic juggler, jazz banjoist, and comedy dancer – and a nowhere-near-retired editor/designer and museum professional based in Newburyport, Mass. He is currently developing a "living history" vaudeville retrospective performance, illustrated lecture, and historical exhibition expressly for museums, historical societies, and college theatre departments.*

Sources:

Cummings, O.R. *Nashua Streetcars 1871-1932.* Manchester, N.H.: New England Electric Railway Historical Society, Inc. 2004).

Cummings, O.R. *Trolleys to the Casino: The Exeter, Hampton, & Amesbury Street Railway*. Manchester, N.H.: New England Electric Railway Historical Society, Inc., 1969.

Griffin, Al. *Step Right Up, Folks.* Chicago, Ill.: Henry Regnery Co., 1974.

Kasson, John F. *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century.* New York, N.Y.: Hill & Co., 1978.

Lynes, Russell. *The Lively Audience: A Social History of the Visual & Performing Arts in America 1890-1950*. New York, N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1985.

Malloy, Scott. *Trolley Wars: Streetcar Workers on the Line.* Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996.

Nasaw, David. *Going Out: The Rise & Fall of Public Amusement*. New York, N.Y.: Basic Books, 1993.

Pollock, Robert F. *Down by the Riverside: Remembering Norumbega.* Newton, Mass.: Newton History Museum, 1999.

Stein, Charles W., ed. *American Vaudeville As Seen by Its Contemporaries*. New York, N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984.

Thomas, Joseph D. *Lincoln Park Remembered*. New Bedford, Mass.: Spinner Publications, 1999.

Web Sites:

www.bera.org (Web site of the Shore Line Trolley Museum, East Haven, Conn.).

www.defunctparks.com (Web site by Joel W. Styer, with an index of defunct parks and a selection of park profiles).

www.napha.org (Web site of the National Amusement Park Historical Association).

www.portlandmaine.gov/rec/troll.htm (Portland, Maine, Park & Recreation Dept. web site page on Riverton Trolley Park)

www.rogerwilliamsparkzoo.org (Web site of Roger Williams Park, Providence, R.I.)

www.salemweb.com/tales/willows.shtml (Article on Salem Willows by Salem historian Jim McAllister).

www.trolleymuseum.org (Web site of the Seashore Trolley Museum, Kennebunkport, Maine).

www.trolleystop.com (Web site of trolley historian Rick Russell; article "Trolley Park").

A partial list of notable New England trolley parks:
(While some on this list are beach parks or city/town parks, their history is closely tied to the trolley era.)

Connecticut
Lake Compounce (Bristol; 1846-present)
Luna Park (Hartford; 1906-1930)
Savin Rock (West Haven, 1870-1966)
Quassy Park (Middlebury; 1908-present)

Maine
Riverton Trolley Park (Portland; 1896-1929)

Massachusetts
Lincoln Park (Dartmouth; 1894-1987)
Mountain Park (Holyoke; 1894-1987)
Norumbega Park (Newton; 1897-1964)
Riverside Park (Agawam; 1840-present; trolley svc. 1900)
Salem Willows Park (Salem; 1858-present)
Salisbury Beach (Salisbury; trolley service 1893)
Whalom Park (Lunenburg; 1893-2000)

New Hampshire
Canobie Lake Park (Salem; 1902-present)
Hampton Beach (Hampton; trolley service 1899)
Pine Island Park (Manchester; 1902-1961)

Rhode Island
Rocky Point Park (Warwick; 1847-1995)
Crescent Park (Riverside; 1886-1979)
Roger Williams Park (Providence; 1896-present)

Vermont
Lake Bomoseen Park (Castleton; trolley svc. 1906-1916)
Dewey Park (Montpelier; trolley svc. c. 1900)
Queen City Park (Burlington; trolley svc. c. 1900)

(The author and his wife performed on selected dates at eight of the 21 parks listed above from 1975-2000.)