

Another Texas First: Six Flags Over Texas and the “Theme Park”

by Scott Sosebee

The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.

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(OCT 31, 2022) The anticipation began among my brothers and me in about April. It was close enough for us to see the end of the school year, and that always meant the beginning of the expectation of a trip somewhere. Now, my Dad considered himself perhaps the “biggest Texan” there was, and he always told us that there was never any reason for us to travel outside the borders of the Lone Star State. I believed him implicitly—I was as proud of Texas as he was—and never even gave a thought to the fact that our means precluded a visit to anyplace more exotic than a locale we could reach on no more than a one-day car ride. One place that we visited time and time again was what I thought surely must have been the most exciting and fun place on the face of the earth—Six Flags Over Texas in Arlington.

I can still remember those car trips to Six Flags, first from Abilene, and after a move when I was eight, from San Angelo. The first leg of the trip was excruciating because we thought we would never get there as my Dad drove through the brush and mesquite covered plains of central West Texas. Finally, when we got close to Weatherford my brothers and me knew we were getting close. Then the buildings of Fort Worth came into view, and before we knew it we entered the DFW turnpike (I am dating myself now)—that was when it began to be a reality that once again we were going to have a day filled with excitement, wonder, some fear on a roller coaster, and of course “Pink Things” (if you do not know what a “Pink Thing” is you have missed out on one of the tastiest frozen treats ever concocted).

While as a child Six Flags was just a great place to visit, it is only now that I realize how important it is as a historical attraction. Depending on your perspective, Six Flags Over Texas was the first “theme park” in the nation (Disneyland is not considered a “theme park” per se), the creation of Angus Wynne, Jr, a Tarrant County real estate developer who seemed to be involved in almost any endeavor in the region. After visiting

Disneyland in the late 1950s, Mr. Wynne became determined that Texas needed just such an attraction. He gathered a group of investors, who became the Great Southwest Development Group, and bought what was then some inexpensive land in Arlington, equidistant between Dallas and Fort Worth. Wynne insisted that the park have a “theme,” and he settled on one that every Texan would recognize and identify with—the six flags that have flown over the state. Construction began in August 1960 and after \$10 million (a handsome sum in 1960) the park opened its gates in August 1961.

Admission to the park during its first year was \$2.75 for adults and \$2.25 for children. It cost 50 cents to park your car. Its original attractions were not much when viewed from today’s perspective; the “happy motoring” car ride, a slide out of the “skull” on Skull Island, a petting zoo, tethered burro rides, and the “Astrolift” gondola. Just under 10,000 people attended the grand opening, and by November 25, 1961, more than 500,000 had passed through its gates. Wynne’s dream was an unqualified success.

As the years moved forward, Six Flags Over Texas became one of the most successful and innovative theme parks in the country. Attendance boomed throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s as the park vied year after year with The Alamo as the most visited tourist attraction in the state. Some notable “firsts” achieved by the park were: first to introduce one-price admission for all rides and shows; first “log flume” ride, the El Aserradero in 1963; first mine trail roller coaster, “The Runaway Mine Train” in 1966 (which used to scare me to death!); the “Big Bend” coaster in 1971, and the first coaster with consecutive loops, the “Shock Wave” in 1978; and the first “freefall” ride, the “Cliffhanger” in 1982. In fact, the “Big Bend” was an innovative ride, at the time it was built the fastest roller coaster in the world. It also set off a “coaster race” throughout the nation as parks competed to add higher, faster, and “loopier” steel coasters every year. “Shock Wave” was part of that race, but Six Flags over Texas again proved innovative in 1980s when it opened “Judge Roy Scream,” a retro “throw back” wooden coaster that restored the thrill of the shakes and special rattles of those types of constructions. The new ride again set off an “arms race” of wooden coaster. Six Flags over Texas topped the charts again with the “Texas Giant,” which when it debuted in 1990 was the tallest wooden coaster in the world. It has been since replaced with the “New Texas Giant,” a steel coaster. In all, as of 2022, Six Flags over Texas contains seventeen coasters within its park, with more planned to open in 2023.

They added a number of special celebrations through the years as well. Beginning in 1985, Six Flags added its special “Holiday in the Park” celebration with thousands of Christmas lights, decorated trees, special shows, and select attractions open. While the park held a special Halloween parade on the holiday for the first time in 1973, it took things a step further in 1988 with its first “Fright Fest” special theme. “Fright Fest” essentially turns the entire park into a big Halloween Party every late September through the first weekend in November, full of scary monsters, chain-saw wielding villains—I mean, it is Texas, after all—and attractions

made over as haunted houses and specially decorated enticements. It has become one of the park's most successful ventures, and another theme park—Universal Studios in Hollywood and Orlando—took notice and launched their own version, “Halloween Horror Nights,” in 1997.

Six Flags remains a profitable and successful destination. While many believe that it is owned by the financially troubled Six Flags Theme Park Corporation, it is not. Instead, it is owned by a group of 120 investors and managed by the Six Flags Corporation. The park has been a part of almost every Texan's mosaic for over sixty years and the fun appears to have no end in sight. I haven't visited Six Flags in more than twenty years; I suppose I have just gotten it in my mind that I'm too old, but perhaps I should rethink that and take it all in again this summer.

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