

Coming of Age in Kennywood

The Kennywood Picnic marked the beginning of summer. The week before school ended in June, tickets went on sale both for the rides and for the chartered trolley that would take us to everyone's favorite amusement park. School closed for a day and most of the neighborhood made its way up the Monongehela River to Kennywood Park.

The park sits on 93 acres. A large carousal sits in the middle - a convenient meeting place. Across from the carousal is a large pool surrounding a small island. The island supports a ride that spins six-person cylinders out over the waters. Below, high school boys labor at the oars of heavy rowboats, trying to impress their admiring girlfriends. Extending out from the carousal and the lake are numerous venues of entertainment, like spokes on a wheel.

My early entry into Kennywood was limited to one venue: Kiddieland. Mother stayed with me while my older brothers enjoyed the other venues. They spent most of their time on the three big roller coasters: the Pippin, the Racer, and the Jackrabbit. The Pippin had the biggest dips. The Racer was the fastest, with a double track that ran two trains simultaneously. The Jackrabbit had a double dip that lifted everyone from their seats. Those

rides had height restrictions and it would be years before I was tall enough to ride them. Kiddieland had its own roller coaster, a mild ride that left me longing for the bigger ones.

Kiddieland was one spoke emanating from the lake and carousal. Noah's Ark dominated another spoke, a large rocking funhouse with a jet of air that lifted ladies' skirts at the entrance. Bumper cars looked over at the ark, the front seat reserved for kids with an adult. A third spoke held a miniature golf course - an attraction for later years. The most important spoke, the one that held my yearnings, led to the roller coasters.

In the final week of third grade, I finally got my chance. It rained on the day of the picnic, a not uncommon occurrence. Our family waited until Dad came home from work to drive us out to Kennywood. The rain had mostly stopped by the time we arrived. Within a half hour, all the rides were running. Dad took myself and my two brothers to the Pippin with the biggest dip in the park.

My brothers insisted that we sit in the last car, saying that it provided the best ride. The attendant released the brake on the six car train and it slid onto a conveyor belt that pulled it high above the park. For a brief second we had a great view of all the other rides. Then we plunged down a steep dip and up a shorter one, and into a wooden tunnel that covered the first turn. Every male let loose with a Tarzan call that reverberated off

the wooden walls. The next dip came quickly and the linked cars climbed onto the next conveyor belt that took us high above the park again. The turn at the top was rather slow, building anticipation for the biggest dip that plunged into a deep ravine. For a few magic seconds we were soaring through the air. Seconds later we raced up the opposite slope. The final dip was much less dramatic, just big enough to bring us gliding home.

Two more roller coasters awaited. The Racer featured two trains on parallel tracks. The dips were quick and the turns sharp, creating the impression of speed. The train on the right led through most of the trip, only to be overtaken by the other train at the end.

The Rabbit lacked the speed of the Racer and the big dips of the Pippin, but it had a double dip. Its third dip flattened out half way down, then plunged again, lifting all the riders out of their seats and pressing their legs against the safety bar. Once safely back, we headed again for the Pippin.

The rides transformed Kennywood Park. No more the mild twists and turns of Kiddieland. Each roller coaster had its own attraction, its own reason for wanting to come back. But, most important, I had finally come of age.