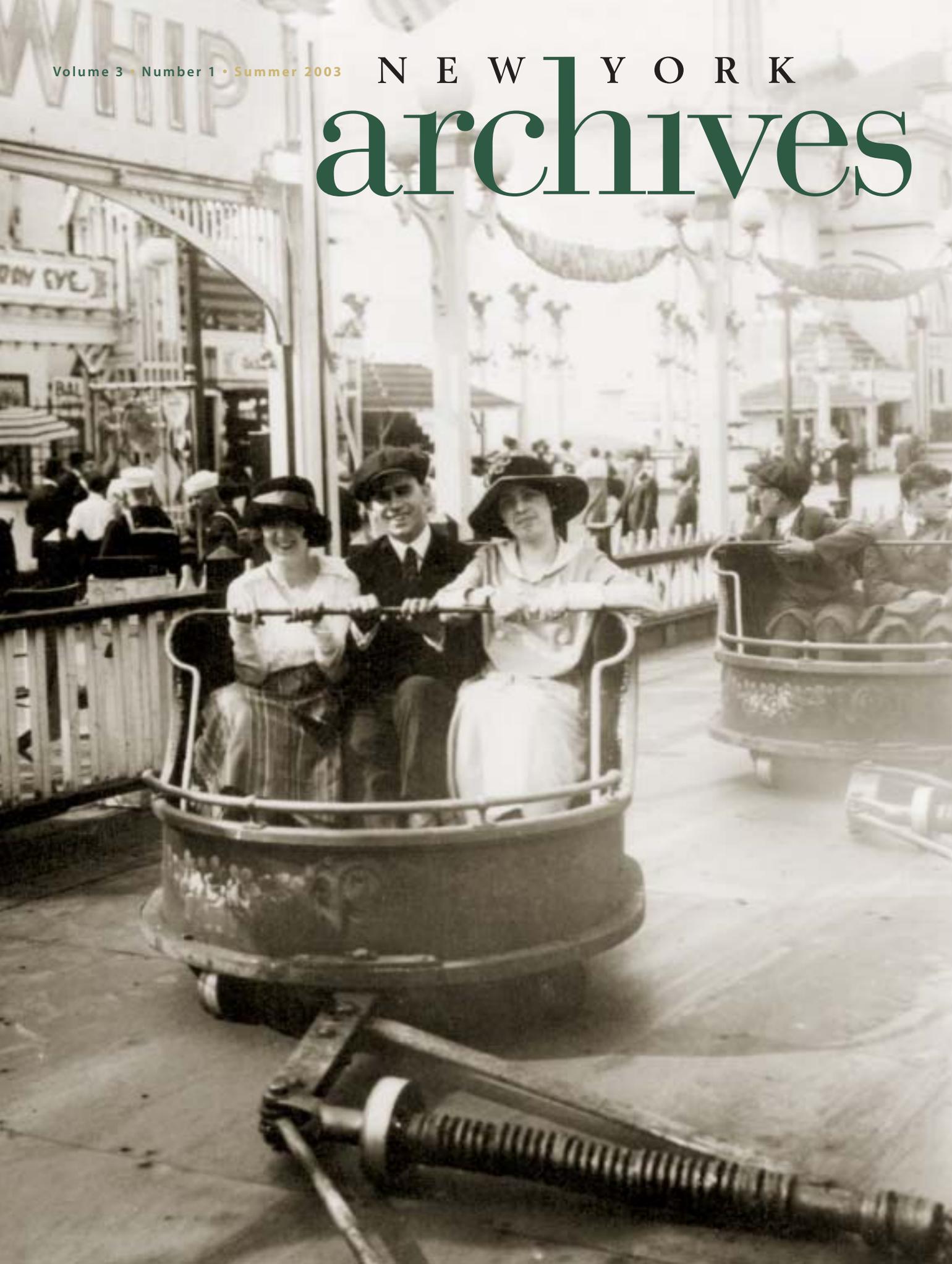


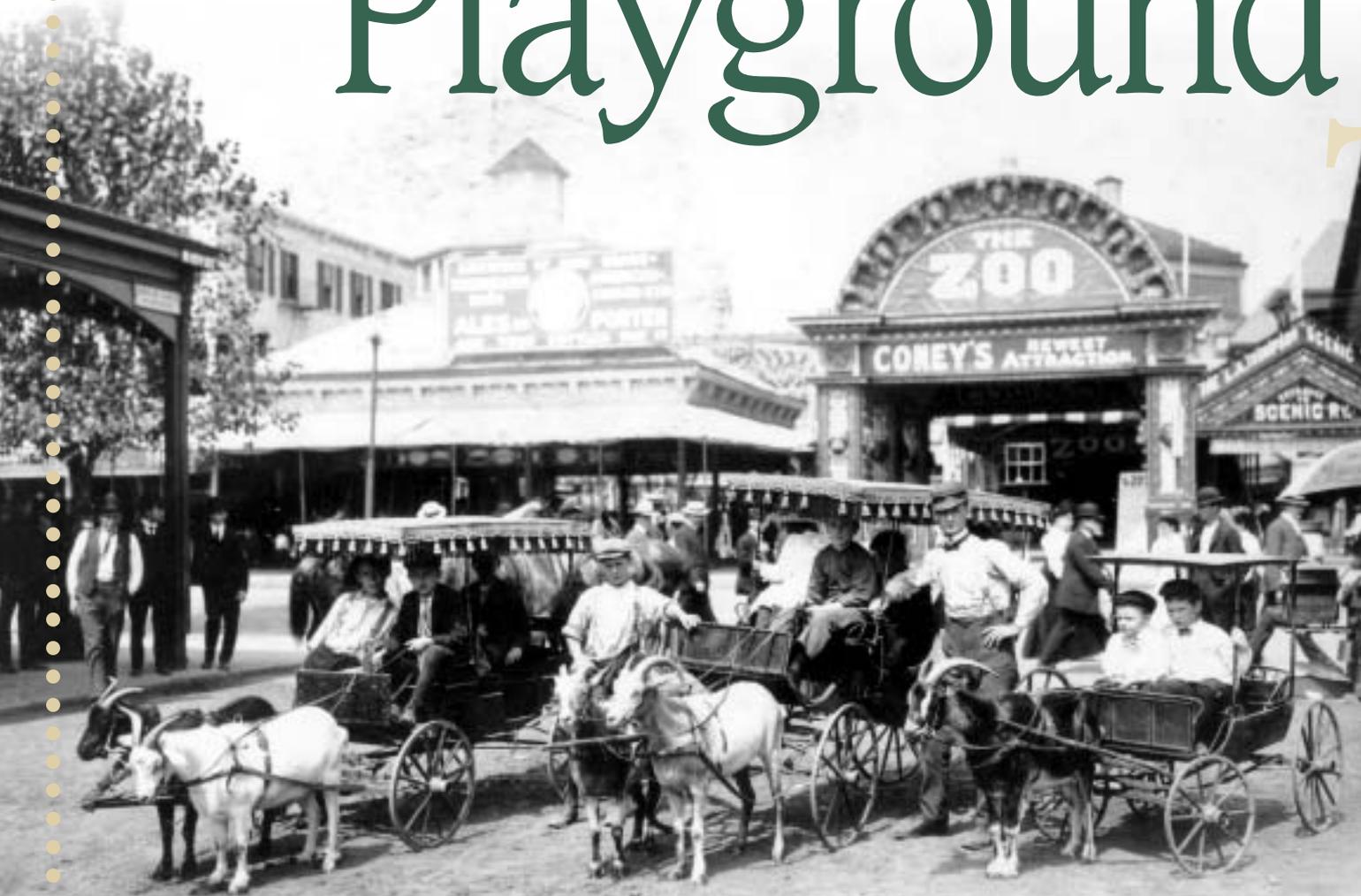
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# The Biggest Playground



At the turn of the century, Coney Island's Luna Park was the first modern amusement park, where pleasure, play, and having fun became a billion-dollar business of smiles

*A ride in a goat cart was just one of many ways that people could "laugh, enjoy themselves, and... spend money while being amused."*

BY WOODY REGISTER

# On Earth

**T**ravel to just about any corner of the globe and you'll find a seaside carnival, urban "fun fair," or arcade with deafening video games called Luna Park. In Argentina, Japan, France, Saudi Arabia, Italy, Australia, Israel, Cyprus, South Korea, Hungary, Turkey—anywhere, that is, except the United States—Luna Park is *lingua franca* for the screaming pleasure of roller coasters, the crazy driving of bumper cars, the giddy sky-scraping of Ferris wheels that anyone of any age would recognize as an amusement park.

Ironically, although that singular name has now all but disappeared from our language, for the first half of the twentieth century Luna Park was part and parcel of our American vernacular. In 1903 a pair of showmen, Fred Thompson and Elmer "Skip" Dundy, opened a twenty-two-acre amusement park at Coney Island in Brooklyn-by-the-sea. They named the resort after Dundy's sister, and Luna Park subsequently became the most popular summer destination on the North American continent.

Today, near the park's original location on Surf Avenue,

only a saloon, furniture store, and housing complex bear the appellation. There's no amusement park anymore: it closed in the mid-1940s after a series of devastating fires. But a hundred years after it opened, the idea of Luna Park—and its vision of how life should be—is still very much with us.

## Pleasure Palaces

Luna Park did not invent Coney Island; that "great breathing space by the sea" had been luring metropolitan crowds to its seashore, its resort hotels, and its raucous amusement thoroughfare called the Bowery since the 1880s. By 1903, Coney Island had become a bustling summertime destination for millions of pleasure-seeking New Yorkers. Most of its diversions were respectable, although a few of them, like gambling and prostitution, were not. But the concept of pleasure that Thompson and Dundy introduced to Coney Island on the night of May 16 was unlike anything New Yorkers (or anyone else) had ever seen before: an exotic city-within-a-city crowded with brilliant white palaces and ornamented with showering fountains, onion domes,

glittering towers, and minarets. It seems unlikely that any amusement park today could move us as much as Luna Park stirred New Yorkers on that first night and for the rest of its first season.

At precisely 8 p.m. on May 16 the electrical switches were thrown, and against the early evening darkness the outlines of Luna Park's fantastic buildings burst into view, lit by more than 200,000 small incandescent bulbs. The *New York Times* reported that 45,000 people "rubbed their eyes and stood in wonder and pinched themselves to see if there was not something wrong somewhere." Electric illumination was already commonplace in New York City, but the sheer intensity of the

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**Luna Park was a playground dreamed up by a man who cared little about making a lot of money: what he really wanted was to have fun.**

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spectacle was not meant to cast light or eliminate darkness. It was intended to jolt the imagination. As a bedazzled *Brooklyn Eagle* reporter observed, "It seemed that a huge mantle of light had been let down from the sky to disclose the domain of an unknown world."

After paying a dime and passing through a massive arch that spelled out "The Heart of Coney Island" in such lights, the opening night crowd beheld a world that was a combination of circus, dime



*Left: “The Whip” at Luna Park, c. 1920. Three years after it opened, Luna Park counted five million visitors. Many waited in line for over an hour for rides that lasted two minutes.*

*Right: There were no right angles or rectilinear edges in Thompson’s Luna Park architecture because they reminded him of church sermons.*

museum, and carnival midway. There was a dance hall, Wormwood’s Monkey Theater (featuring variety acts by animals), an outdoor circus, Venetian canals, and a nursery of premature babies warmed in glass-enclosed incubators and overseen by licensed nurses and doctors. For another fee, patrons could take “A Trip to the Moon” or to “20,000 Leagues Under the Sea to the North Pole,” or watch a spectacle called “War of the Worlds.”

#### **A World Removed**

There had been amusement parks before, like Coney Island’s own Steeplechase Park, a bazaar of funhouse pranks and entertainments that gave people license to shed their workaday composure.



disorderly version of the everyday world that operated according to its own antic rules, and it seemed dingy and unspectacular in comparison with Luna Park, an architecturally unified and exotic garden of enchantment. Although built out of flimsy and inexpensive plaster, it appeared extravagantly luxurious and monumental—a vision of what the new twentieth century could or should be. As a popular writer of the time observed, Luna Park seemed “a world removed—shut away from the sordid clatter and turmoil of the streets.” Everywhere there “was life—a pageant of happy people; and everywhere was color—a wide harmony of orange and white and gold.” It was billed as “The Biggest Playground on Earth,” and its existence both asked and answered the question, *Shouldn’t life always be this way, full of joy and color, without toil or pain or sacrifice?*

Fred Thompson certainly thought so; Luna Park was his design. A self-styled architect and visionary, Thompson was one of the builders of America’s

and leisure economy. In an era when the nation’s productive technologies and exploding industrial capacity flooded markets with new things to buy, Thompson and others like him retooled the machines to manufacture and sell the most sought-after items of all: pleasure and play. His ventures were just one dimension of a national revolution in urban commercial amusements that catered to the rapidly expanding middle class. Thompson’s publicist called this new amusement economy “the billion-dollar smile,” and declared that “it is spread to-day from Seattle to New York, from Bangor to the Gulf.” It was true: American cities large and small offered low-priced theaters and vaudeville houses, opera companies, dance halls, restaurants, amusement parks, ballparks, nickelodeons, and picture palaces.

#### **Showman Extraordinaire**

Born in Ohio in 1873 but raised in Tennessee, Thompson had staked his initial claim on the business of smiles by

building shows for the amusement midways of the era's great world's fairs. Moody, quixotic, given to alcoholic binges, he was an outsized figure even for his day. The spectacle of his failures would eventually overwhelm the wonder of his successes. But for a decade, with the debut of Luna Park (and later his mammoth New York Hippodrome in Manhattan, the largest theater in the world at the time), Thompson reigned as one of the early twentieth century's premier showmen.

Thompson explained that Luna Park was a playground dreamed up by a man who cared little about making a lot of money: what he really wanted was to have fun. And Luna was a place where grown-ups could forget their responsibilities—including the kids. Having "too much work and too little play," adults suffered from what Thompson called "tuberculosis of the heart," for which Luna was the antidote, an oasis of make-believe where "play was everything" and "responsibility had never been dreamed of." He prohibited right angles and rectilinear edges in his architecture because they reminded him of church sermons, fashioning instead "Oriental" cities of sinuous curves that would make people "laugh, enjoy themselves, and...spend money while being amused." At Luna Park, a man got to be a kid again.

## Luna Park's fantastic buildings burst into view, lit by more than 200,000 small incandescent bulbs.

### Sensational Attendance

Thompson had struck gold with this idea at Buffalo's 1901 Pan-American International Exposition. His fantasy twenty-minute "Trip to the Moon" was the sensation of the fair, convincingly executed with theatrical tricks and illusions. After a lecture on the "great secret of anti-gravitation and aërial flight," passengers boarded a cigar-shaped winged vessel and soared to the moon, where the Lilliputian natives treated them to bites of green cheese and a dance performance by shapely moon maidens. The following summer Thompson, now partnered with Skip Dundy, reopened "Trip" at Coney Island's Steeplechase Park, where it was a hit again. In 1903 they made it the centerpiece of Luna Park, where it continued to make money over the next decade. Since then, no major amusement park has operated without a similar attraction: anyone who embarked on Disneyland's 1955 "Rocket to the Moon," or who has joined E.T. on his bicycle at Universal Studios' Orlando Theme Park, has experienced the same thrilling illusion of anti-gravitational flight.

Luna Park's turnstiles suggested Thompson was on to something. The park counted an attendance of five

million in 1906, a number equal to half of New York State's population, and in 1909 Coney Island logged twenty million visitors. Indeed, the island had gotten so crowded that the ordinarily grave *New York Times* quipped that year, "[w]ho ever goes nowadays except everybody?"

### Dreamlands and Wonderlands

"Everybody" included entrepreneurs from across the nation and around the world who hustled to duplicate Luna Park's success. It's not hard to see why: several million people, multiplied by a dime or any smaller coin, amounted by definition to a bonanza. In the fall of 1903, an alliance of businessmen and politicians had already broken ground at Coney Island for Dreamland, which promised to be bigger and better than Luna in every way. It was bigger, but never as popular as its rival. By 1910, the American urban landscape glimmered with hundreds of amusement parks—Dreamlands, White Cities, Electric Parks, Sans Soucis, Wonderlands, Fairylands, Playlands—nineteen of which were named for the Coney Island original. Luna Parks also arose in Berlin, Buenos Aires, Rome, Sydney, and Melbourne. At a time when American industri-

alists were focused on domestic markets, Luna Park, with its vision of a magical world, was perhaps the nation's most dazzling and desired cultural export.

But by 1912, Fred Thompson was financially bankrupt and physically broken, undone by extravagance and alcoholism. Luna itself passed into new hands, and Thompson's death in 1919 coincided with the expiration of the Luna Park phase both of Coney Island and of amusement parks in general. In 1920, the five-cent subway came to Coney Island, and the summertime crowds, most of them from the city's immigrant-based working-class neighborhoods, swelled again. Yet even though new landmarks like the Cyclone roller coaster dominated the skyline, by the 1940s the vast numbers of visitors—forty-six million in 1943 alone—came for the surf and beaches, not the parks. At Coney Island and elsewhere, amusement parks were dropping their prices and retooling their attractions to appeal to children and families, while middle-class Americans turned more and more to movies and automobiles for escape and diversion.

### The Good Life Lives On

Still, anyone who has visited the capitals of the Mickey Mouse empire in the years since World War II can recognize the promise of a return to childhood as an essential selling point of the Disney theme parks and movies.



*Luna Park gave many middle-class New Yorkers their first glimpse of an elephant. They could even ride one.*

"There's a place where magic lives," Disney's current ad campaign assures us, reminding us by default of the un-magical circumstances of our everyday lives. All ages are urged to have fun together at the various Disney destinations, which include not only

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the vast American sites but also mini-cities in Paris, Tokyo, and, soon, Hong Kong. It seems the vision of the Good Life has changed little since the turn of the twentieth century, when Luna Park existed as a haven "for grown-ups and Peter Pans who will never grow up." It's just that now the kids can come along. ■

#### LUNA PARK

In the early twentieth century, Luna Park and Fred Thompson were sensations around the world, as well as in virtually every sector of American culture. Genteel publications like *Theatre*, *Metropolitan*, *The Delineator*, *Century*, and *The Independent* explored the subjects, but detailed and flattering examinations can also be found in such magazines as *Scientific American*; in technical and trade journals on engineering, electrical lighting, retailing, and toy manufacturing; in major newspapers; and in glossy publications devoted to show business. The best places for finding such publications are the older urban public libraries, the best of which is the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, particularly its theater collection. The library also has a rich collection of newspaper clippings on the history of early twentieth-

century American theater. The clipping files on Luna Park, Fred Thompson, the New York Hippodrome, and Thompson's many theatrical productions, while fragile from age and handling, are the starting point for investigation of his life and career.

Coney Island has attracted much scholarly attention since the 1970s. Images can be found in the collections of the Museum of the City of New York, the New-York Historical Society, the Brooklyn Historical Society, and the Library of Congress. John Kasson's *Amusing the Millions* (1978) is the best-known historical account, but Michael Immerso's *Coney Island: The People's Playground* (2002) is the best comprehensive history of the resort from the late 1840s to the present. Undergoing a revival of sorts today, Coney Island is still worth a visit. If you cannot go there in person, the Coney Island U.S.A. website ([www.coneyisland.com](http://www.coneyisland.com)) will confirm that Coney is still alive and well.

Finally, to get an idea of Luna Park playgrounds around the world, type into Google the phrase "luna park" ([www.google.com/advanced\\_search](http://www.google.com/advanced_search)). Even if you specify only websites written in Croatian, you will still get 130 hits.