

Lakeside Amusement Park still thrills and chills



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Lakeside Amusement Park was founded in 1908 by a beer baron.

By **TOM NOEL** |

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Colorado residents and visitors have long enjoyed having two major amusement parks to visit every summer. While Elitch's, Denver's oldest and largest amusement park, has been much celebrated in print, Lakeside Amusement Park has not been chronicled — until now. Colorado native and historian David Forsyth tells the full story in the recently published “Denver’s Lakeside Amusement Park: From the White City Beautiful to a Century of Fun” (University Press of Colorado).

Forsyth links Lakeside to Mayor Robert Speer’s City Beautiful Movement to transform Denver from an ordinary, dusty, drab Western town into a tree-shaded, park-filled city that Speer dubbed “Paris on the Platte.”

Lakeside Amusement Park began with Denver beer baron Adolph Zang. His Zang Brewing Company had grown into the largest pre-Prohibition brewery in the Rocky Mountain region, leaving him plenty of beer money. He spearheaded a group of local businessmen who in 1908 founded Lakeside as a summer playground sitting on a 37-acre lake.

To escape Denver's liquor laws, the beer-minded Zang incorporated Lakeside as a separate Jefferson County town with its own rules and own police force. To this day, Lakeside may be the only amusement park with its own jail. Although beer flowed, Lakeside strove to maintain a wholesome reputation. Its bathing beach prescribed separate areas for men and women.

After Zang's death in 1916, Lakeside struggled until Benjamin Krasner, a long-time park employee, bought it in 1935. Krasner had come from the East Coast in 1917 to operate a Lakeside concession and had risen to manager of all concessions by 1930.

Krasner greatly improved Lakeside during the Great Depression and World War II when many parks around the country struggled and died. He brought to its El Patio Ballroom such big-time stars as Duke Ellington and Glenn Miller. To give the entire park a facelift, Krasner hired Denver architect Richard Crowther. He transformed the park into Colorado's brightest Art Deco-style venue and outlined buildings in rainbow-hued neon tubes.

Lakeside still boasts one of the country's longest miniature railroads, a tiny but rideable train that circles the lake. The park installed its most famous ride, the Cyclone roller coaster, in 1940. This was Colorado's champion roller coaster for decades and a national favorite. By 1986, Lakeside boasted three different roller coasters. Speed demons fancied Lakeside's Speedway, one of Colorado's most popular, from its 1938 opening until it ran out of gas in 1988.

In an age of corporate chain mega-parks, Lakeside has defied the odds and history to survive for more than a century as a small, family-owned and -operated park. The hero of the Lakeside saga is Krasner. According to his daughter (and Lakeside's current owner), Rhoda Krasner, her father gloried in a "long and delighted infatuation with Lakeside, a child's magic world."

He died in 1965, but Rhoda — Krasner's only child, who worked at the park since childhood — carried on. Rhoda's daughter Brenda, a physician, also helps manage the park with some help from her own little girl — the fourth generation of Krasners to be involved.

Lakeside is a trip back more than a century in time. The Tower of Jewels, the signature 150-foot-high tower on Sheridan Boulevard, survives from 1908. The Krasners' willingness to innovate and remain economical explains Lakeside's success. In 1938, for example, when most amusement parks were still relying on streetcar traffic, Lakeside converted its baseball field to a 7,000-car paved parking lot. Free parking remains a Lakeside lure. Admission tickets are also a bargain at \$3.

The payoff is those warm summer nights when Lakeside crackles with dazzling light, excitement, romance and mechanical adventures.

Tom Noel welcomes your comments at dr-colorado.com. His "Colorado: A Historical Atlas" won the 2016 Colorado Book award for best history book.

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