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When bottle caps were precious: Golden days at Suburban Park

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Sean Kirst / The Post-Standard
By



Photo courtesy of Mike Ranger

The crumbling entranceway to the old Suburban Park, as it appeared for years after the closing of the legendary amusement park, along Route 92.

As a little girl, Robin Michaud Shope was a regular at the old Suburban Park amusement park in Manlius. To her, the place was the best part of every summer. Yet her family didn't have a lot of money, and what she remembers — even more than climbing on the rides — is the ritual she followed just to get inside the gates.

"I grew up in Fairmount, and if you saved enough Canada Dry bottle caps you'd get a discounted rate, and I used to beg to get taken there by my older brother and sister," Robin said. Indeed, a quick search of the archives reveals that any child who showed up with 99 cents and six Canada Dry

bottle caps had full access to any ride at Suburban Park. The only exception was the fearsome "Wild Mouse" roller coaster, which demanded its own ticket.

Every summer, Robin's mother would put an empty coffee can in a kitchen cupboard. The children would go looking for bottle caps along the sidewalks and the streets, and especially near the old Ponto's Market on West Genesee Street. One by one, the bottle caps went in the coffee can. Once the children had enough for the discount, their mother would drop them off at the familiar entranceway, beneath the face of a laughing clown ...

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And Robin would race to Laff in the Dark, "where two big wooden doors would open when the car hit the doors, and inside you'd always smell axle grease or something, and a rope or these canvas strips would brush against your head, and glow-in-the-dark things would jump out at you." While she loved the bumper cars, she was afraid to ride the Wild Mouse. She'd also stand back and watch as her brother and sister climbed into a metal cage, a contraption the children would then push back and forth. The goal was to get moving fast enough to cause the cage to swing high in the air, and then flip over.



The land used by the old park now holds a Route 92 apartment complex. Suburban Park, opened in



Courtesy Onondaga Historical Association.

The midway of the old Suburban Park, in Manlius.

1898 as a way of attracting riders to a local trolley line, closed after the 1973 season. Gone were the country and western shows that attracted such luminaries as Hank Williams Jr. and June Carter. Gone was the Ferris wheel that Windy Craig, a Syracuse disc jockey, rode in 1964 for a world record-setting 183 consecutive hours.

To Robin, the place remains alive in memory. At 50, she works as a massage therapist near Louisville, Ky. As she watched her own children grow into adults, she gradually came to realize how Suburban Park was intertwined with her happiest childhood moments. She figured she was

hardly alone in that regard, and she decided to start a **Facebook page** that would allow others who loved the park to exchange stories.

The page caught on. "It's very exciting," she said. "New people go there every day." Some describe how their parents met during events at the old Suburban Park dance hall. Many reminisce about the Comet, the creaky roller coaster that created the illusion — at least for young riders — that its cars would lurch into space at one especially sharp turn. Others remember a children's train that passed close to Edwards Falls in Limestone Creek.

Those tales carry profound importance for Robin. Her childhood was not always easy. Looking back on it, her years in Fairmount were a respite. "It was a stable time in my life," she said. Robin stayed in the same house from kindergarten through eighth grade. In the classroom, she would daydream about each coming summer, when she knew she'd get at least one visit to Suburban Park.

It didn't last. Her mom's marriage broke up. Their longtime landlord died. Before long, the family was again on the move. As a teen, Robin had to deal with new schools, new teachers, new friends. She remembers those years as "a hard time." By the end of high school, she was ready to stop being a kid.

Over time, she realized there was one place in childhood where she felt utterly safe. A few years ago, Robin began searching the Internet for tales of the Comet or the Wild Mouse. She didn't have much luck. She decided to create the Facebook page, confident of finding many others who could remember when a Canada Dry bottle cap in Syracuse equated to a small piece of treasure:



Just five more, and you were on your way to Suburban Park.

Sean Kirst, a columnist with The Post-Standard, is seeking reader memories and stories about Suburban Park. Comment here or email Kirst at skirst@syracuse.com.

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Robin Michaud Shope

Robin Michaud Shope and her siblings, during their prime years for Suburban Park. From left, Dawn, 11; Randy, 10; youngest brother Rick on the lap of Robin's stepfather, Dick; and Robin. Taken June 1969, Dawn's birthday.