

In Our Backyard

Coney Island

heralds old-fashioned family fun

By *Melissa B. Stoller*



"Paul" of Gregory & Paul's at Coney Island

The slogan at Deno's Wonder Wheel Park in Coney Island is: "It's a place for fun and family." The slogan aptly speaks to a day at Coney Island – plenty to see and explore. The aquarium, amusement parks, hot dogs, and of course, the beach are current reminders of why this seaside resort still remains a destination for

families looking for some old-fashioned fun.

I have a special fondness for Coney Island because I was raised with stories my Grandmother Jessie told about how she met my Grandfather Jack on a trolley ride back from Coney Island. She had been spending the day on the boardwalk with her family, and she saw a man on the trolley who piqued her interest. Being very bold, she tried to get his attention, and finally resorted to throwing peanut shells on his lap. When Jack looked up, she started a conversation. When she learned that he would be getting off the trolley a few stops later, she invited him to dinner at her home. Jack declined, saying that he didn't have the proper clothes, but she offered to lend him a shirt and tie of her father's, and so he accepted. Jessie told me she knew she probably would not have seen him again if he had gotten off the trolley, so she persevered. Of course he became smitten, and they were married not long after.

Was it the sea air or the mood of the day that led to romance on that long-ago trolley ride? I cannot say. But I do know that Coney Island has a special feeling about it that is still present today.

My family likes to start the day by visiting the *New York Aquarium*, located at Surf Avenue and West 8th Street. (718-265-FISH, or www.wcs.org). It was relocated to Coney Island in 1957, and is part of the Wildlife Conservation Society. Don't miss the seal and bottlenose dolphin show, the beluga whales, the walrus, the sharks, and the seahorses. The Explore the Shore area features hands-on demonstrations, and Sea Cliffs is a 300-foot re-creation of a Pacific coast habitat. The aquarium hosts special events throughout the year, including Expedition Africa, August 4-5, and Corals of the Caribbean, August 18-19. Both events include arts and crafts, music and dancing, and face-painting.

If you walk up the boardwalk adjacent to the aquarium, you'll see the water and hear the surf immediately. The boardwalk was built in 1923 to accommodate the crowds that frequented Coney Island. Stop for lunch at *Gregory and Pauls*, which boasts the best hot dogs in Coney Island. According to Paul, they have been in Coney Island for over 50 years, and at this location at West 10th Street for over 35 years. Paul says they are "famous for quality food and refreshments," including clams, fried shrimp, shish kabobs, corn-on-the-cob, and knishes. (1001 Boardwalk, 718-449-4252). You can eat at the outdoor tables, or on benches overlooking the beach.

While eating, you'll hear men shouting, "All it takes is one dollar to win a prize. Step right up and step right in." A day at Coney Island really would not be complete without a stop at the amusement parks. By 1865, Coney Island featured bathhouses, hotels, and a reputation for fun. The world's first roller coaster, the Switchback Railway, debuted in 1884 and revolutionized the area. Coney Island

began its heyday in 1895, when the Sea Lion Amusement Park opened. In 1897, Steeplechase Park was built, soon followed by Luna Park in 1903 (which was built on the site of the defunct Sea Lion Park). The last big park, Dreamland, opened in 1904. By the 1930s, when my grandparents were newlyweds, there were 16 million summer visitors to Coney Island.

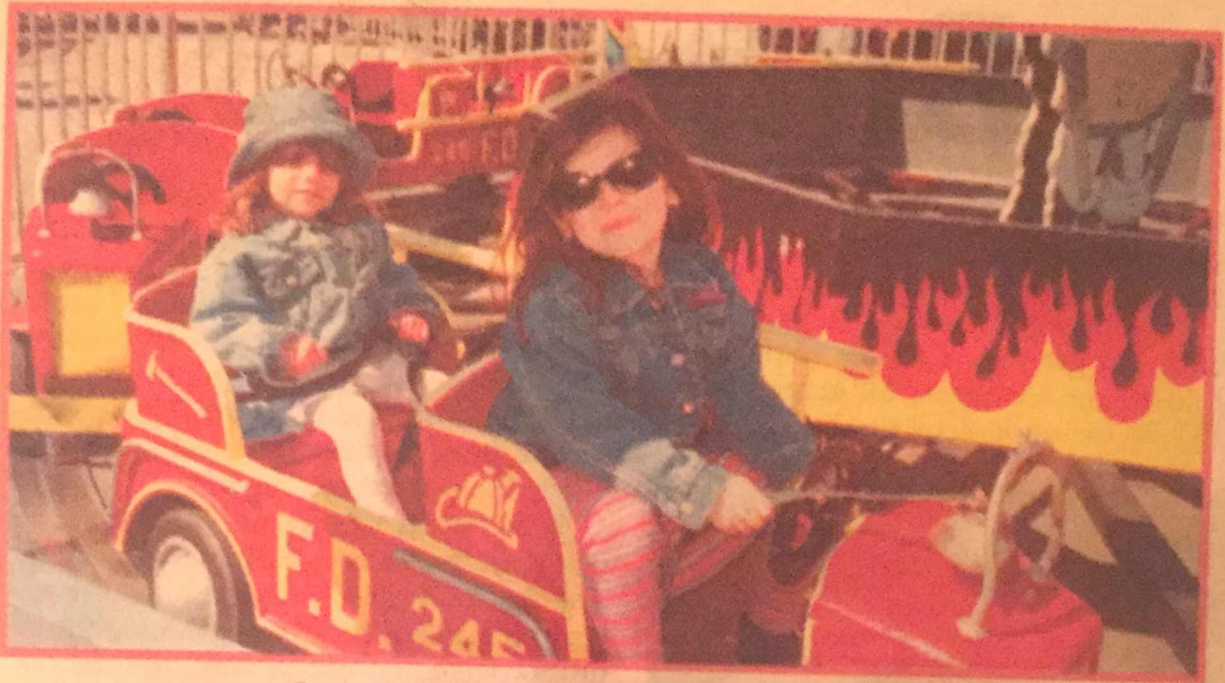
Today, there are two great amusement parks. *Deno's Wonder Wheel Park* features the famous Wonder Wheel ferris wheel dating from 1920, a carousel, mini train and boat rides, small roller coasters, and many other wonderful rides. (718-372-2592 or www.wonderwheel.com). *Astroland Amusement Park*, "Home of the Famous Cyclone," features a carousel, looping truck ride, and other kiddie rides, as well as a water flume. You also can play skee ball and other indoor arcade games. I love the water squirt race, and usually spend several dollars to win a toy that I could buy for much less. We have never tried the Cyclone roller coaster, which opened in 1927, but we marvel at the brave people screaming as they whiz by. (718-372-0275 or www.astroland.com).

At both parks, you can buy a ticket of 10 rides for \$15. The parks also sell delicious funnel cakes, cotton candy, popcorn, and other treats. At Deno's, you can even buy a single-use 27-exposure camera.

After visiting the aquarium, eating, trying your luck at the games, and riding the amusement rides, leave some time to explore the area's natural attraction — the beach and the Atlantic Ocean. Across from the amusement parks is a small playground right on the beach, which my girls Zoe and Jessie (my Grandmother Jessie's namesake) always enjoy. Head down to the water to collect shells and take a dip. You also can walk out along the fishing pier and watch people trying their luck with rods instead of water squirters. The sea air and lull of the water make you remember why Coney Island became a popular attraction so many years ago, and why it still holds appeal today.

If you decide to stay for dinner, there is no shortage of excellent food in the area. One block over from the boardwalk on Surf Avenue, you'll find Nathan's, which has been in business since 1916. If you are looking for a larger meal, try *Gargiulo's Restaurant*, which opened in 1929 and serves delicious Italian food. My mother-in-law remembers eating there frequently as a young girl. (2911 West 15th Street, 718-266-4891). Next time we'll try *Totonno's*, which claims to be the oldest pizza parlor in Brooklyn and is supposed to be one of the best pizza parlors in New York City (the pizza at their Upper East Side location is fantastic!). (1524 Neptune Avenue, 718-372-8606).

Coney Island...



Jessie & Zoe Stoller at *Coney Island Amusements*

There are several other attractions that we'll visit on our next excursion. *The Coney Island Museum* features memorabilia and artifacts from Coney Island's history. It is run by Coney Island USA, which also operates Sideshows-by-the-Sea in the same building. (718-372-5159). The B & B Carousel on Surf Avenue dates from the 1920s and is open year-round. Since 1983, June brings the annual Mermaid Parade, where Brooklynites and others assemble to show their love for Coney Island. Finally, professional baseball returned to Brooklyn in 2001. The Brooklyn Cyclones, the Class A affiliate of the New York Mets, now play at Keyspan Park, the site of the old Steeplechase Park. (718-449-TIXS).

For further information, visit www.coneyisland.com, which features information about events and activities in the area, and provides web links to all the major attractions. In addition, call the Coney Island Chamber of Commerce at (718) 266-1234. When you get home, read *Brooklyn Pops Up*, presented by the Brooklyn Public Library. The two-page pop-up about Coney Island, by Chuck Murphy, is exquisitely illustrated and informative, and is a wonderful reminder of this fun-filled destination.

Getting there: by car, take exit 7S (Ocean Parkway South) off the Belt Parkway; by subway, take the D or F trains to West 8th Street, and walk on the overpass directly to the aquarium or boardwalk. If you need a ride back to Manhattan, call Mega Car Service at (718) 633-2020. They are reliable and charge approximately \$30. ◆