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COASTAL BUSINESS *Life*

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**8 FOOTBALL SEASON** It's time for CCU, Clemson and USC fans to get their pom-poms and pennants out of mothballs.

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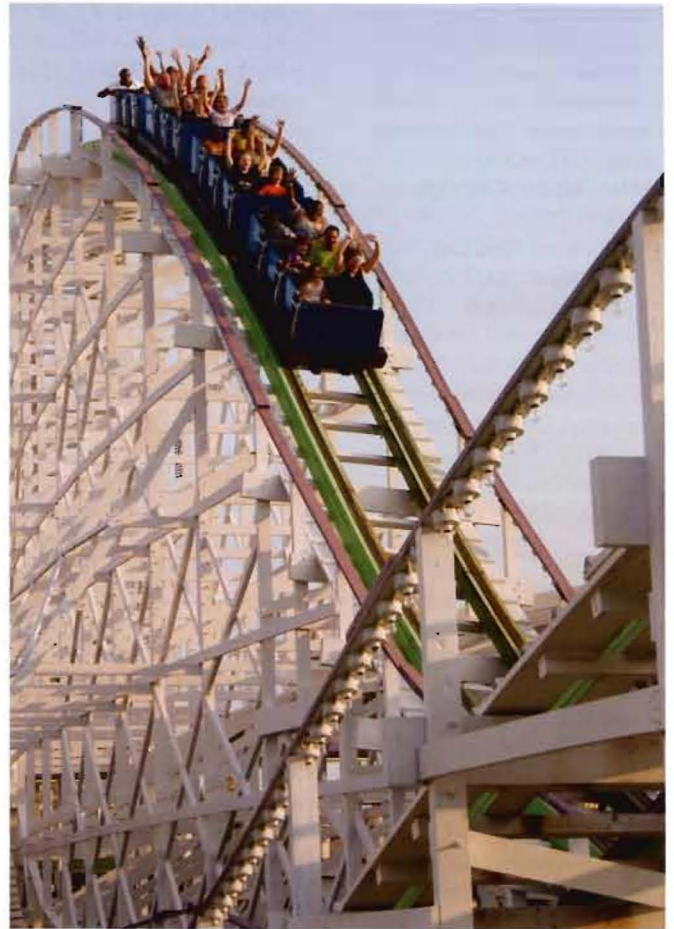
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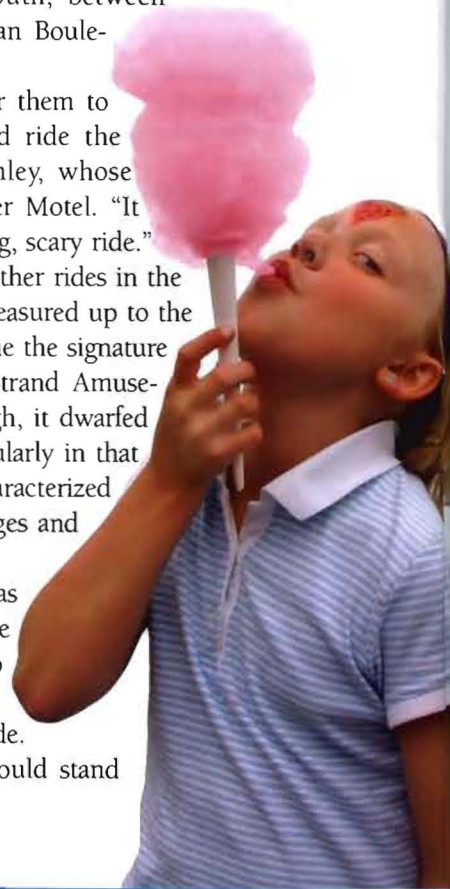
The months leading up to the summer of '66 were a lesson in patience for young people in and around Myrtle Beach. A mammoth roller coaster was being built on 3rd Avenue South, between Kings Highway and Ocean Boulevard.

"We couldn't wait for them to get finished so we could ride the thing," says Stoke Cromley, whose family owned the Mariner Motel. "It was Myrtle Beach's first big, scary ride."

Granted, there were other rides in the area, but nothing quite measured up to the Swamp Fox, which became the signature ride at the new Grand Strand Amusement Park. At 72 feet high, it dwarfed everything around, particularly in that area of Myrtle Beach, characterized by weathered beach cottages and two-story motels.

When the coaster was finally completed in June of 1966, kids showed up en masse, shelling out 50 cents every time they rode.

"All the young people would stand



in line to ride it over and over again," says Sheron Pope, who lived in Garden City Beach. "Everybody wanted to get in the front car, and they'd hold their arms up. I remember the 'click, click, click' when it was climbing to the top, and then when it went down that first hill, it scared the daylight out of me...when it was over I couldn't pry my fingers off the bar."

The developer of the park was the late William Parker. "He looked up and down the East Coast for a place to build a park, and he settled on Myrtle Beach," says Cynthia Parker, who worked alongside her husband for more than 20 years. He enlisted Philadelphia Toboggan Company, a prominent roller coaster manufacturing firm, to design and build the Swamp Fox. The finished product was a half-mile, figure-eight track with a drop of 62 feet and speed of up to 50 miles per hour.

In 1989, Hurricane Hugo damaged or destroyed most of the park's rides, including the legendary Swamp Fox. Soon after, the Parkers sold the park to the Ammons family, owners of the Sea Mist Oceanfront Resort, who rebuilt and enlarged the park, nearly doubling the number of rides and restoring the Swamp Fox to the manufacturer's original specifications.

In 1992, the park reopened with a new name: Family Kingdom Amusement Park. Today it has 33 rides and spans 15 acres, including a water park across the street, added in 1997. More than 250 seasonal workers are employed at the park between Easter and late September, when it closes. Approximately 35 people work year-round.


In addition to the Swamp Fox, Family Kingdom's anchor rides are a 100-foot Ferris wheel, the largest in South Carolina; an interactive dark ride called the Great Pistolero Roundup; the log flume; the flashy Hurricane, used by country singer Kenny Chesney for a 2005 video; and the Family Kingdom Locomotive, which takes families on a tour of the park.

Kiddie rides are also well represented. "That's been our niche so far in

Myrtle Beach," the park's general manager, Donald Sipes, explains. "We were in competition with the Pavilion for such a long time, and they kind of went after the teenage market, so we focused on the smaller children and families."

With the Myrtle Beach Pavilion Amusement Park closed, Family Kingdom has seen an influx of new visitors. Even with the new Hard Rock Park opening, attendance numbers are up over previous years, Sipes says.

Parker, who now teaches at Myrtle Beach Elementary School, is glad to see Family Kingdom doing well. "That park is clean, and it's well run. It's just a nice park. I teach second grade and have children who go there, and they love it."

For the bigger kids, the Swamp Fox is still the number-one attraction. They still stand in line and scramble for the front car. They still hold their arms up daringly. And their screams still pierce the ocean air when they round that bend and the bottom falls out. 



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