



The Texas Cyclone, above, and the Texas Tornado, above right, are just two of the memorable rides lost when AstroWorld was reduced to a pile of rubble.

Goodbye to the Wonderful World of Fun

Incredible! Within 12 hours of the end of Final Fright Night at AstroWorld, when the venerable theme park closed for good, crews were on the ground dismantling the rides that generations of Houston kids grew up and threw up in. By the following Friday, big red tube sections lay on the ground, unrecognizable as thrill rides, and dump trucks and flat beds were everywhere, ready to cart the old attractions off to theme park limbo.

As one of 23,456 people, I was there on opening day. On that sunny June first, 1968, Judge Roy Hofheinz, the "AstroWizard," impatiently unlocked the gates 15 minutes early; the Hofheinz grandchildren unleashed 2,000 balloons; and 500 VIPs marched in behind the AstroWorld Band. The rest of us followed in a high holiday mood, ready to experience a "Wonderful World of Fun."

The Judge had announced the project in September 1967. As detailed in *The Grand Huckster*, a 1980 biography of Hofheinz, it took \$25 million to tie down the 56 acres he promised would become "an elaborate, high quality, multimillion-dollar family amusement and entertainment center." As the biography

notes, Hofheinz went on to boast, "This is destined to become the world's greatest tourist attraction."

Indeed, it was a huge project: 600,000 cubic yards of earth fill; 10,000 trees; and 2,000 tons of air conditioning to cool patrons. There was to be a staff of 1,200. The nearby Harris County Domed Stadium parking lot could hold 30,000 cars, and brightly colored trams would pick up customers there and deliver them over Loop 610 bridge to AstroWorld's front gate. Hofheinz hired Harper Goff, then working on EPCOT, and Frank Arnold to design AstroWorld's interiors, and Sam Daidone to travel the world to buy "stuff" to fill them.

Hofheinz predicted the park could entertain 20,000 people per hour at peak times, and host 1.6 million in a year. In the early years his projections were very close. The second year alone attendance increased 25 percent.

AstroWorld was just plain fun, and a bargain. You parked for 50 cents, and adults got in for \$4.50, children for \$3.50. Once inside, all the rides were free. The timid and very young could enjoy the steam train that circled the

park, or drive the little cars along their guide rails in the AstroWay. There was a beautifully restored Denzel Carousel with an automatic Wurlitzer band organ, and there was the Six Shooter that swung you around in a swing seat, high above the landscaped grounds. Adventure was offered by the Lost World Ride, and a lift up the 340-foot AstroNeedle. Thrill-seekers lined up to ride the Black Dragon, or scoot through "Der Hofheinzberg" on a sled, almost colliding with the Abominable Snowman. Everyone could get in the act at the Crystal Palace, the root beer saloon that employed the best and brightest from Houston high school drama departments. All this, and it was gorgeous, too, full of themed landscaping, with flowers everywhere. The *Houston Chronicle* reported shortly after the opening, "AstroWorld, like the Domed Stadium, defies description."

The demise of AstroWorld probably started with the Judge's financial troubles. By the end of the 1960s he had leased the park to Six Flags Corporation, and by June 1975 the corporation owned it.

Seeing the park come down last October reminded me of the closing and

demolition of the older Playland Park, built in the late 1930s on South Main near Murworth. That park was just a bunch of rides, nothing fancy, but it did have a Woody—an old fashioned wood roller coaster—on which I lost my glasses when I was in the sixth grade. Playland Park already looked pretty tired when work on the AstroDome began in 1961, and in no time at all the land became more valuable than the attraction.

Six Flags blamed rising land values for the closing of AstroWorld. I'm not buying it. Six Flags in Arlington, on the freeway linking Dallas and Fort Worth, has to be on much more valuable property. It's hard to tell, but the decision is more likely due to poor business judgment and a lack of interest in the Houston market.

Toward the end of Judge Hofheinz's life, longtime family friend Reuben Askenase commented, "The Judge was one of the most imaginative men I'd ever met in my life." The late and lamented AstroWorld was one of the best manifestations of that limitless imagination. What will be the next to go, the Astrodome? — Barry Moore