

Coney Island

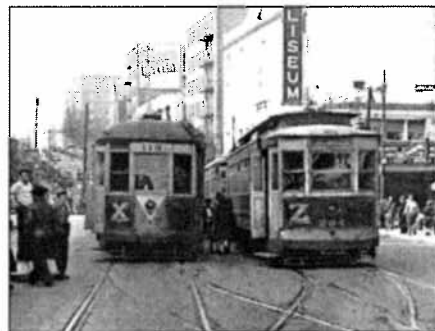
You cannot talk about the immigrant experience of New York City without mentioning Coney Island. This famous area of the Brooklyn shore was the recreational home to thousands every week. Estimates say that an average of 500,000 people came to Coney Island on a typical summer weekend. It was a true melting pot of people from all parts of the city (and the world) and it provided them with an area to relax and forget, just for a short while, about the daily struggles and urban blight of the big city.

Today we connect Coney Island to a hot dog eating contest at Nathan's, a small boardwalk with only a few concessions, an amusement park with an old fashioned rollercoaster – the cyclone - and the aquarium. However, for many years, Coney Island was so much more. I recently came across the front page review from *The New York Times* about the opening of the new and improved Coney Island in 1904. I have added some photographs that I found during my research to make the article stand out more in your mind.

What made Coney Island unique to New York was that it was only a subway ride away from all of the ethnic neighborhoods in the Bronx, Manhattan, Queens and Brooklyn. You can still take the same subway line today and for most of the route in Brooklyn it is above-ground, giving the rider an amazing view of the borough of Brooklyn and the skyline of the city.



Note that the early subway cars were driven by steam trains on the elevated tracks.



You took a trolley car if you lived locally

While you read the attached article look for the answers to the following questions.

What made Coney island so attractive to so many people?

What words used to characterize groups of people would the New York times NOT use today?

What do you think the Police Commissioner meant when he stated that Coney island was moral?

One word used you will not know is **pugilistic** = having to do with boxing which was the largest spectator sport of these times.

“They took the lid off Coney island last night, and a quarter of a million men and women got a glimpse of a swaying, rocking, glittering magic city by the sea. It was Coney island’s opening day, but Coney island never before experienced such a bewildering opening...there were more dazzling, wriggling, spectacular amusements offered than had ever before been collected together at any one place at any time.

Picturesque Luna Park, with its added acres of new attractions, and the much-talked-about Dreamland presented a bewildering mixture of men, animals, and things that words can barely describe. They had been gathered from every corner of the globe... With the new order of things came herds of elephants, genuine Nautch girls, Indian rajahs, snake charmers, Eskimos, Indians, Japs, Russians, Chinamen, acrobats, jugglers, performing camels, pugilistic horses, and bears that could ride a horse...



Coney Island in the early 1930s

Sixteen of the newly acquired acres of land in Luna Park were set aside for the reproduction of the glittering Durbar of Delhi...The magnificence of the scene was such as to make those who witnessed it imagine they were in a genuine Oriental city. In fact, there was a charm about the streets of Delhi that kept the people spellbound until the exhibition ended. Five thousand people at a time saw this remarkable show, and then went back to see it a second time.

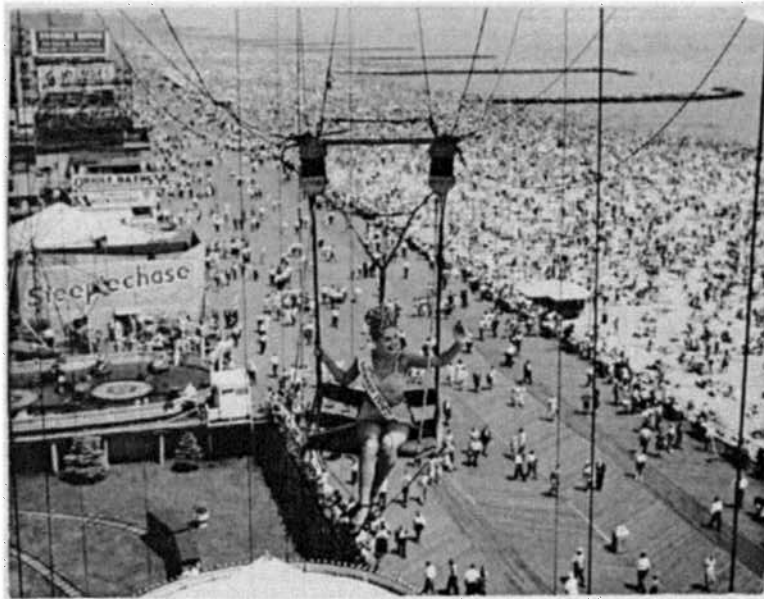
The Trip to the Moon, Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea, the chutes, the scenic railway, and the other features of Luna Park were all patronized. A new feature, known as the whirl-the-whirl, proved to be a money coiner. In that boats are arranged to sail through the air in circular fashion at a height of almost a hundred feet...

...Police Commissioner McAdoo... [said] that the new Coney island was clean, moral, and magnificent

Probably one of the most interesting features is the Dwarf city, with its thousand tiny inhabitants. Storekeepers, policemen, firemen, musicians, wagon drivers, and others who live there are all dwarfs...

The Incubator Building in Dreamland...has a gable with a large stork overlooking a nest of cherubs. It is a scientific demonstration of how the lives of babies can be saved. It cost \$36,000, and the building is full of babies.

Source: *The New York Times*, May 15, 1904



A typical summer weekend at Coney island

Now that you have read the article what seemed bizarre to you about the new Coney island? Were you surprised or shocked about some of the exhibits in the amusement park? Do you believe that such exhibits should be allowed today?