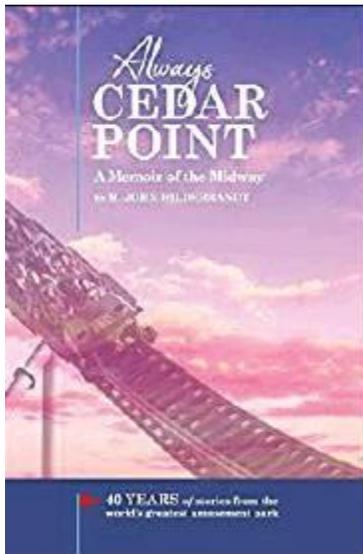


New Book 'Always Cedar Point'

Former Cedar Point GM, H. John Hildebrandt, releases memoir –
ALWAYS CEDAR POINT

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Just in time for Christmas, a Cedar Point insider has come out with a new book offering a candid look at how the park grew from a local attraction to the best roller coaster park in the world.

“Always Cedar Point” is a memoir by H. John Hildebrandt, who took a job in the park’s PR department after finishing college, quickly became the marketing director, married a Sandusky Register reporter and eventually became the park’s general manager, responsible for daily park operations.

When Hildebrandt began work in February 1974, there was no “Cedar Fair.” There was only one amusement park: Cedar Point. The best thrill ride was a steel coaster called the Jungle Jet. Eventually, a second amusement park was acquired, and the company grew until it owned 11 parks. Cedar Point added a water park, additional hotels and campgrounds. Hildebrandt was there for almost all of it until he retired in 2013.

“Always Cedar Point” has many interesting stories, such as the time Hildebrandt got into big trouble for ordering a staffer to tell the truth when a reporter asked a question.

The GEMINI ROLLER COASTER, which opened in 1978, became a huge success, but it had a few bumps along the way, such as the fact it opened in mid-June, weeks after opening day. As work proceeded on the new coaster in April, a young PR employee asked Hildebrandt, the marketing director, what to say to a TV crew from Cleveland, which had shown up to do a story on the new ride. She knew she’d be asked when the ride would open. Hildebrandt told her to say it was doubtful for opening day but they’d be shooting for Memorial Day weekend.

The TV reporter zeroed in on the news and announced park officials confirmed the big new roller coaster would not be ready for opening day. Cedar Point’s then-CEO, Bob Munger, was furious. In hindsight, Hildebrandt writes, he should have handled the story himself. “I should have dodged and weaved like a good White House spokesperson and said something like we are planning or ‘hoping’ to open the ride on opening day.” As the twin ride took shape, Hildebrandt’s wife was expecting twins, and smart alecks at the park launched a betting pool on whether the twins or the ride would arrive first. The author records that Marie Hildebrandt did not think the contest was hilarious.

The book has many inside stories and apparently a closely-guarded secret or two. Hildebrandt reveals, for example, that in 1977, one of the monkeys in the “JUNGLE LARRY” attraction escaped in the middle of the summer season. Two popular rides had to be shut down for hours in the interest of guest safety. Park officials were resigned to news coverage, as everyone from the park knew what had happened and drafted a short statement. (Elsewhere in the book, Hildebrandt describes the art of crafting a statement to deal with bad news.) But the calls from the Sandusky Register and other news outlets never came. The escape remained little-known, at least to park outsiders, for more than 40 years.

The book’s chapter on “Jungle Larry,” Larry Tetzlaff, describes Tetzlaff’s keen show business sense and his ability to handle animals. He had two wives, Jane and Nancy. His second wife, a good business partner, agreed to be known as “Safari Jane,” even though that wasn’t her name. “Not many women would do that,” Hildebrandt dryly notes.

The book is full of carefully-recorded details. In a section dealing with Cedar Point’s famous attention to keeping the park clean, Hildebrandt says the park had about 2,000 trash cans and that park officials tried to have one every 25 feet, to make it easy for guests to toss out the garbage. “Trash cans were in rows, like soldiers, and should be pleasing to the eye. Jack

Falfas was famous for constantly fine tuning the position of trash cans as he walked the midway,” Hildebrandt writes.

The book gives full attention to the launching and marketing of the park’s famous rides, including Magnum XL-200, Millennium Force and Top Thrill Dragster. The marketing of Cedar Point tickets also gets a full chapter, including the various discounting schemes used to lure visitors to the park. When Hildebrandt retired in 2013, only 2 percent of park visitors paid the official full ticket price. “We used to joke within Marketing that only a crazy person pays full price for a Cedar Point ticket,” Hildebrandt writes.

“Always Cedar Point” has many vivid sketches of the people who contributed to the rise of Cedar Point, such as Dick Kinzel. In a question-and-answer appendix at the back of the book, Hildebrandt calls Kinzel Cedar Fair’s “most visionary” leader. Don Mears was the “best businessman,” Jack Falfas was the “most knowledgeable,” while finance experts Bruce Jackson and Tom Salamone were the “smartest.”

Hildebrandt’s favorite celebrity visitors were actor Rob Lowe (“friendly and polite”) and

NASCAR driver Jeff Gordon. His favorite rides were Gemini, Magnum, Millennium Force and the railroad.

The new book is available at the usual online outlets and is being sold at Books A Million at Sandusky Mall; other outlets are being lined up.

John Hildebrandt and his wife, Marie, talk about their previous book, “Lake Erie’s Shores and Islands,” a pictorial history of the area.

