

# Shooting the Haight Street Chutes

**Turn-of-century speed ride drew thousands to area**

BOB BURNSIDE

It is early morning on a sunny day, Nov. 2, 1895. As the cable car you have been riding up Market Street makes a turn onto Haight Street and passes the Protestant Orphan Asylum at Buchanan, you notice a change of scenery.

The houses are farther apart, with fields in between where you can see a few cows and horses grazing. As you crest the hill at Baker, you notice the Calvary and Odd Fellows cemeteries off to the north. Buena Vista has been recently reserved as a park by commissioners Ashbury, Clayton, Shrader, Stanyan and Cole.

Today is the opening of San Francisco's newest attraction, "The Chutes" at the end of Haight Street, and a crowd is already gathering. The skeletal 60-foot structure stands starkly alone in the early morning sun.

The attraction will soon prove so popular that an elevated model railroad, balloon ascensions, boxing exhibitions and a zoo will be added in later years. It is claimed that the gondola, a boat on rollers, reaches 60 miles per hour as it hits the water of the artificial lake at the bottom of the tower. And that's a thrill; hardly anyone has ever gone that fast up until now.

## An instant success

By Nov. 19, 1890 13,634 patrons had paid the 10 cents admission for the rip-roaring 10-second ride down The Chutes. That day, Professor Markesburg made a parachute drop nearby while hanging from his teeth. Soon afterward a competitor made a drop hanging by his toes.

"Man Fish" ate, drank and smoked under water. Antonio Pirri rode a bicycle down The Chutes and into the lake and was immediately surpassed by "Arion," who jumped his bicycle over a live trolley wire 60 feet above the lake. The courageous Albert Richards thrilled crowds by making a 60-foot dive into two feet of water.

In 1897 a theater was added where the crowd was entertained by circus acts. Neighborhood residents could hear lions roaring at night. "Little Egypt" excited the most interest in 1899 with her "hootchykootchy" dance.

By 1900 many theater productions including Nora Bayes had come through the Chutes. Her recent successful run at the Orpheum was a sure sign of the Chutes' popularity.

The year's entertainment ended with a holiday production, "Ten Days in Fairyland," by a juvenile company.

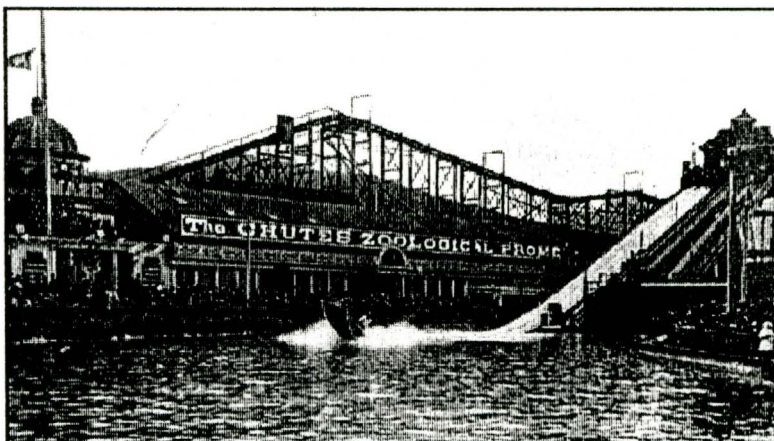


PHOTO COURTESY OF GREG GAAR

**60 miles per hour thrills brought thousands of people to this Haight Street attraction and spurred development of the neighborhood.**

At the end of 1901, a huge Christmas tree was erected bearing a present for each child in the audience.

In 1902, The Chutes had outgrown its Haight Street location and was moved to the Richmond District around Fulton Street and 10th Avenue. Its success continued for several years. Entertainment included a dog and cat act, a lady cyclist, performing bears, acrobats, aerial artists, ice skaters, freaks and equilibrium artists.

Families made a day of The Chutes entertainment, which included a realistic depiction of the Johnstown Flood supplemented by a promenade and picnic in the park. In 1904 the Japanese musical extravaganza "Princess Fan Tan" required 300 children in the cast. Later that year audiences were shocked by the antics of Bothwell Browne's Gaiety Girls in a burlesque called "Twirly Wirly."

The Chutes was barely damaged by the earthquake and fire of 1906. Due to

a scarcity of theaters elsewhere in the city, legitimate theater found a home at The Chutes. In 1907 a \$50,000 ice rink opened and the world-class entertainer Al Jolson was featured.

Another big attraction of that year was a realistic spectacle called "Fighting the Flames." All the paraphernalia of an actual fire was exhibited. The thrilling moment of the show was heroine Sylvia Barret's four-story leap into a net.

In 1909, The Chutes entertainment complex moved to the block bounded by Fillmore, Webster, Eddy and Turk streets and opened on Bastille Day, July 14. The new Chutes stressed outdoor entertainment featuring "Desperado" who dove from a 70-foot tower and "Demon" furiously pedaling a burning bicycle down the chutes and into the water. Motion pictures were projected across the lake onto an outdoor

■ *see Chutes, back page*



## THINGS TO SEE AND DO AT THE CHUTES.

- **THE DOUBLE WHEEL**  
You go two ways at once
- **HUMAN ROULETTE WHEEL**  
Greatest novelty of the Age
- **DEVIL'S SLIDE**  
Ride the Sclator and Zig the Zags
- **IMPERIAL FLEA CIRCUS**  
Trained Fleas in a Two-Ring Performance
- **ELECTRIC WONDERLAND**  
Newest Electric Novelties
- **SHOOTING THE CHUTES**  
Longer & Swifter than Ever Before
- **ELEVATED SCENIC RAILWAY**  
See it all from above
- **HA HA GALLERY**  
See Yourself as Others See You
- **PENNY ARCADE**  
Five Shows for a Nickel
- **MOVING PICTURES**  
Free Open Air Exhibitions
- **THE CRAZY HOUSE**  
Amazing Mysteries

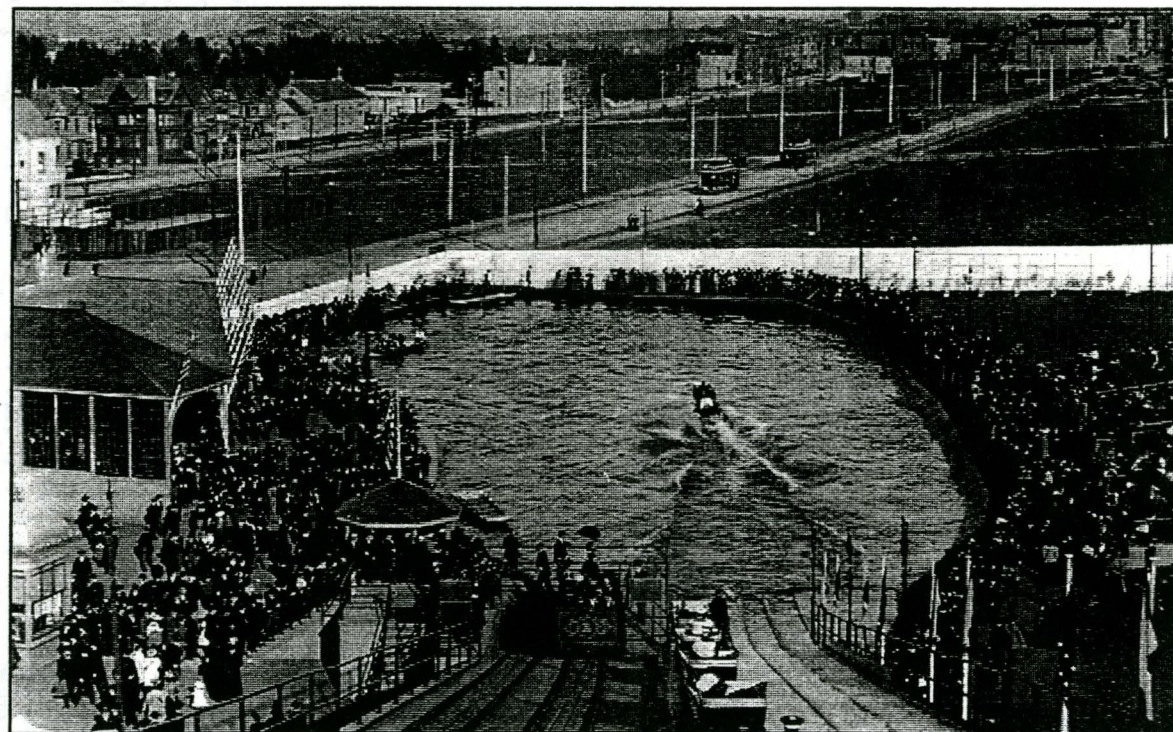


PHOTO COURTESY OF GREG GAAR

Picture taken near the intersection of Haight and Clayton streets looking northeast. The Cable cars in the background provided the means to neighborhood's development and an end to farming.

### *Chutes, from page 11*

screen while an orchestra set the mood. A large outdoor cafe provided refreshments.

Freak entertainment and physical sensation were the main attractions of the new Chutes. German athlete Marino was run over by an automobile loaded with seven passengers. There were elephant rides and exhibition fights between the reigning heavyweight and middleweight champions.

An accident on the "Double Whirl" where a woman died after being thrown

from a car marked the end of an era. The resulting bad publicity affected attendance. In March of 1911, The Chutes ceased all advertising. The ramp was dismantled, but the tower remained "for observation." The lake was filled in to make lawns and gardens.

The zoo and most concessions remained open. A reproduction of the Panama Canal was thought not only novel but educational, though attendance of the Chutes' staple Vaudeville acts was dropping when catastrophe struck.

"A fire originating in the Chutes

restaurant at one o'clock this morning destroyed the Fillmore Street side of the Chutes property and many stores," announced the *Chronicle*, "... endangering the lives of over a hundred people, caused serious if not fatal injuries to several and a property loss running into many thousands." The toll: three dead, seven injured and \$250,000 in property lost.

Part of The Chutes was recreated at Playland at the Beach and later demolished in 1952.

