

WHAT GOES AROUND ...

Amusement park has been rebuilt before, owners say it will be so again

By Mark Di Ionno
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

The carousel house at Keansburg Amusement Park is almost empty now. The ride has been dismantled. The shiny jewel-laden horses and carriages, and other animals, are being stored at the water park across the street, also owned by the Gehlhaus family.

All have been recovered since they were swept into town by Hurricane Sandy's tidal surge on the Raritan Bay. Even the lion that a local teen tried "to procure," said Bill Gehlhaus.

But there are still two things missing. The Egyptian Mummy and a display case. Gehlhaus thinks the mummy has become somebody's storm souvenir. The display may have just broken up, and its contents, including paper memorabilia, drowned and scattered.

Too bad. In that case was photographic evidence of the damage done by hurricanes before hurricanes were named. The big ones were in 1938, the Great Atlantic storm of 1944 and Hurricane Donna in 1960. Pictures of upside down kiddie rides, tossed midway stands, crumbled arcades and the boardwalk reduced to looking like "a toothpick factory gone wild," Gehlhaus said.

The case was also a testament to the Gehlhaus family's stubborn commitment to keep the park operating. Visitors who looked at those pictures, for more than five decades now, were astonished at the "then" and "now." How could the park they were enjoying at that very moment ever have recovered from such rampant destruction?

So here we are again, the "then" and "now" all over again. Except then is right now, and the new now will be in the future. The Gehlhaus family will put their broken park back together yet again.

"It never crossed my mind not to rebuild, not for one second," said Gehlhaus as he walked the grounds of his beloved, battered park. "This is what we do. This is who we are."

The cleanup itself is monumental. The roller

ARE THE ROADS ANY SAFER?
Study reveals a rise in rear-end crashes at red-light intersections. Page 13

Riding high, Christie to seek re-election
Announcement comes as governor's response to Sandy propels him to 77 percent approval rating

Audit: MVC missed out on \$12.6M in savings
2011 deal didn't make big cut in Parsons fees

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THE CAROUSEL HOUSE AT KEANSBURG AMUSEMENT PARK IS ALMOST EMPTY NOW. THE RIDE HAS BEEN DISMANTLED. THE SHINY JEWEL-LADEN HORSES AND CARRIAGES, AND OTHER ANIMALS, ARE BEING STORED AT THE WATER PARK ACROSS THE STREET, ALSO OWNED BY THE GEHLHAUS FAMILY.

ALL HAVE BEEN RECOVERED SINCE THEY WERE SWEEPED INTO TOWN BY HURRICANE SANDY'S TIDAL SURGE ON THE RARITAN BAY. EVEN THE LION THAT A LOCAL TEEN TRIED "TO PROCURE," SAID BILL GEHLHAUS.

BUT THERE ARE STILL TWO THINGS MISSING. THE EGYPTIAN MUMMY AND A DISPLAY CASE. GEHLHAUS THINKS THE MUMMY HAS BECOME SOMEBODY'S STORM SOUVENIR. THE DISPLAY MAY HAVE JUST BROKEN UP, AND ITS CONTENTS, INCLUDING PAPER MEMORABILIA, DROWNED AND SCATTERED.

TOO BAD. IN THAT CASE WAS PHOTOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE OF THE DAMAGE DONE BY HURRICANES BEFORE HURRICANES WERE NAMED. THE BIG ONES WERE IN 1938, THE GREAT ATLANTIC STORM OF 1944 AND HURRICANE DONNA IN 1960. PICTURES OF UPSIDE DOWN KIDDIE RIDES, TOSSED MIDWAY STANDS, CRUMBLED ARCADES AND THE BOARDWALK REDUCED TO LOOKING LIKE "A TOOTHPICK FACTORY GONE WILD," GEHLHAUS SAID.

THE CASE WAS ALSO A TESTAMENT TO THE GEHLHAUS FAMILY'S STUBBORN COMMITMENT TO KEEP THE PARK OPERATING. VISITORS WHO LOOKED AT THOSE PICTURES, FOR MORE THAN FIVE DECADES NOW, WERE ASTONISHED AT THE "THEN" AND "NOW." HOW COULD THE PARK THEY WERE ENJOYING AT THAT VERY MOMENT EVER HAVE RECOVERED FROM SUCH RAMPANT DESTRUCTION?

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coaster is now anchored in three feet of sand. The Raritan Bay's briny water corrupted the engines and control panels of every ride. Some ride cars surfed the surge deep into Keansburg's neighborhoods. "We found some about a half-mile away," Gehlhaus said.

Now the ride cars and carousel ponies are

lined up, ready to be cleaned; the mechanical parts shipped to be stripped and refabricated. Engineers from the various ride manufacturers have come in to make sure the metal, structural skeletons are sound.

Unlike at Seaside Heights, where the roller coaster in the ocean has been the signature image of Sandy's power, the Keansburg coaster seemed to have survived just fine, except for the sand at the base and "a couple of support beams got slightly bent," Gehlhaus said.

The Skee-ball and other arcade games, smashed as if by vandals wielding axes, have been carted away. The ground, once covered with sand and muck and a graveyard for thousands of the stuffed animals and other toys from the midway games, is almost clean. Gehlhaus and his brother, Hank, have led a small team of employees in sweeping out the sand, with heavy equipment and brooms.

"I learned to operate a Bobcat (to plow sand)," Gehlhaus said. "I drove one before."

The Gehlhauses say they'll be open by Easter, like every year. "Always," said Hank Gehlhaus, "Every year. This year it's March 31. I wish it was later, but it's not. We have a deadline to make."

"My father and grandfather dealt with worse, in my opinion," Gehlhaus said.

In those days, there was no sand berm between the park and Raritan Bay to diffuse wave surge. The Army Corps of Engineers built those dunes in the late '60s. The old amusement park also had a slightly raised wooden boardwalk, which the surge from those legendary storms turned to thousands of disparate planks, or toothpicks, as Gehlhaus said. Today, the midway is paved.

Like many shorefront amusements and oddities - Lucy the Margate Elephant, for one - the park began as a way to sell real estate.

The very first ride was a ferry boat, which William A. Gehlhaus, the patriarch, used to bring over New Yorkers who might have been interested in a summer home. He built a casino, dance hall, had games of chance and, finally, mechanical rides.

It's a story as American as a Coney Island hot dog. William A. was the son of German immigrants, a baker and brick maker by trade, and started businesses in the Bayshore. He bought up marshlands facing the bay and stabilized the land.

"He had a vision. He knew people would want waterfront property," Hank Gehlhaus said previously. "He filled in all that marshland and



Gov. Chris Christie makes his announcement about a second term at the Port Monmouth Fire House in Middletown Township, surrounded by volunteer emergency personnel.

Christie

Republican National Committee chairman, Christie announced he would run for a second term in 2012.

A Fairleigh Dickinson University poll of 2,000 voters showed that 77 percent of voters supported Christie's re-election.

And a Rutgers University poll of 1,000 registered voters found that 77 percent of New Jersey voters support him for re-election.

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Di Iorio

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and food stands.

“My father sold it in 1972 because he thought he was dying,” Hank Gehlhaus said. “My brother and I were too young to take it over, but the ink wasn’t even dry on the contract before he regretted it. He said it was the worst mistake of his life.”

The new owners thought of razing the park for condos, but the real estate bust of 1987 scuttled the plan. By 1995, they had sold it back to the Gehlhauses.

Now the park is in ruins, and while real estate developers may circle, Bill said he and his brother are resolute.

“We have a big task here, but we’ll get it done,” Bill said as he looked around the park. “We can’t give it up. We have too much time and money invested in this. This is our life. It’s as simple as that.”

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