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Salt Lake County Fire Dept. – A Look Back In Time

As Salt Lake County Fire Department celebrates its seventy-five-year-old relationship with the community, we look back on their involvement with an historic playground, dear to the hearts of many local residents.

Because the County's service area included the rural, unincorporated county, and stretched from the Great Salt Lake to the Wasatch Mountains, most of the fires which the County responded to, before the commerce of the city sprawled out to meet mountain and lake, were house fires and agricultural lands. High rise fires were pretty much left to their counterparts in Salt Lake City where these structures existed. But the County, ever at the ready, was there for Saltair.

On January 14, 1893, it was announced in the *Deseret News* that construction would begin on Saltair, a new resort on the shores of the Great Salt Lake, which was to be as magnificent as

any resort in the world. The project was completed in May of that year. Great wings stretched out on either side of the resort's central pavilion, reaching 1,100 feet from end to end, extending into the Great Salt Lake.

For years, bathers enjoyed the famous waters of the lake, kewpie dolls were the big prize in "four balls for a dime" toss games, the merry-go-round hummed the Merry Widow Waltz and the giant racer was touted as the largest roller coaster in the west. On starry nights, couples danced, fell in love, and magic seemed to fill the salty air. Saltair was the most "happening place" around.

In the early afternoon of April 22, 1925, as the resort prepared to open for the summer season, a fire broke out in the Ali Baba Cave under the grandstand seats of the Hippodrome. Employees tried to squelch the fire but winds fanned the coals and soon the Hippodrome was engaged by the raging flames.



The Saltair fire of 1925.

Resort workers, concessionaires, and volunteers from the Inland Crystal Salt Company worked alongside firefighters who had arrived on special flatcars built to speed fire engines to the resort. The Sugarhouse Fire Station responded to assist, bringing the only truck in the area that could pump salt water. By 4:00, as the wind shifted away from the fire, it looked as though the pavilion could be saved. Minutes later the winds turned again and drove the fire back to-

ber. Only the bathing pier, beach office, merry-go-round, pilings, and giant racer remained standing. Damage was estimated at \$500,000.

Saltair re-opened two-and-a-half months after the fire, on July 1 with a high fence and potted palms installed to hide some of the charred sections which had not been restored. Construction on a new pavilion began in the spring of the following year.

The resort survived the depression

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ward the Hippodrome, fanning the fire into an inferno, and all was lost. *The Salt Lake Tribune* reported "tongues of flame and smoke leaped fifty to one hundred feet [and] shot out and licked up the timbers and beams of the great structure as though they were cardboard."

It took firemen thirty-six hours to subdue the blaze and quiet the last em-

years but took a hiatus for three years during world War II. From 1946 until 1959 when it first officially closed, Saltair was plagued with many problems including rising and falling water levels, another fire in 1955 which destroyed the boiler room and many of the bathhouses, a freak windstorm in 1957 whose 75-mile

Continued on next page



Sandcastle of Saltair designed by Norman Kraus for 1984 Utah Arts Festival.


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an hour gusts blew over the 110-foot giant racer, and financial difficulties. But big name performers such as Sarah Vaughn, Nat King Cole, Stan Kenton, the Ames Brothers and Julie Christy continued to book week long engagements and patrons remained loyal until the end.

New Englanders breathe in the smell of burning leaves in autumn. To us it means racing for the open-air car of the train that went out to Saltair, riding the Giant Racer and screaming all the way, and dancing to Harry James and Louis Armstrong as the waves lapped at the

■ *Firefighters stood by helplessly, unable to get their trucks close enough to the rotting boardwalks to fight the fire, as the swift blaze engulfed the resort.*

After it's closure, several individuals and groups tried to "save" the resort, but to no avail. Saltair stood abandoned and neglected for ten years until, in 1970, it burned to the ground. Firefighters stood by helplessly, unable to get their trucks close enough to the rotting boardwalks to fight the fire, as the swift blaze engulfed the resort.

Terrell Dougan eulogized the fallen resort in the *Deseret News*, July 14, 1975.

"Those of us who lived the last years of Saltair still relish it the way

pilings under the biggest outdoor dance floor in the world. And now, years after the grand Lady of the Lake burned to the ground, new folks or visitors smell that lake wind and say, "What is that strange sour smell?" We 'old timers' lick our lips, trying for a taste of salt, that stupid, pecky salt, and maybe trying, too, for a taste of our childhoods."

The Saltair fires are a part of the Salt Lake County Fire Department's seventy-five year history. The recollections of Saltair are a part of all of us. ■



Fire completely destroyed what was left of Saltair in November, 1970.