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# Giant Dipper's new colors bring back vintage memories

by VICTORIA DAVIS

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People ride the Giant Dipper roller coaster at Belmont Park on Sunday, May 27. / Photo by Thomas Melville

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People ride the Giant Dipper roller coaster at Belmont Park on Sunday, May 27. / Photo by Thomas Melville



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*The newly painted Giant Dipper roller coaster at Belmont Park. / Photo by Victoria Davis*

Belmont Park's Giant Dipper may not be the smoothest roller coaster ride – the twists and turns likening to the feeling of a level five earthquake – but for San Diego natives, like Timothy Cole, it's certainly one of the most nostalgic.

"It just captured me," said Cole, who joined the Save the Coaster Committee back in the '80s after the ride was shut down for the second time in 1976. "There was like a spirit about it or something."

Inspired by the colors of its original coaster car, still on display in the ticketing office, this Mission Beach thrill ride has recently been repainted in rich coats of red, black and gold – just in time for summer. Though most residents can remember the Giant Dipper's previous pink and green hues to match the logo of San Diego Seaside Co., Cole remembers being part of the paint crew during the 14 years before the coaster reopened in 1990.

"When I tried accenting the track in pink, I thought 'Ugh, it looks like Pepto-Bismol!'" said Cole. "So, then I tried painting it in green and that really set it off."

For Cole, this coaster is more than just a ride.

"It's a piece of art," said Cole.

Frank Prior and Fred Church were the artists who designed the Giant Dipper for Belmont Park, which is now registered as a national historic landmark. Though they also built Giant Dippers for the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, Venice Amusement Park and Redondo Beach Park, there's something unique about the one in Mission Beach.

"When he designed this one, Church wrote 'San Diego' on the horizon, and that's how he came up with the rough outline for our Giant Dipper," said Cole, who is a craftsman of model roller coasters himself. "It's almost like the signature of San Diego written on Mission Beach."

While the formerly green track was his own contribution to Church's artwork, as for the recent color changes, Cole says, "the colors were dated. It was time."

The colors and coaster cars might be new, but Church's artistic carnival construct is the same as it's been since 1925. The exciting, rickety thrill ride remains, as the red warning sign at the front reads, "not for the faint of heart."

Judy Swink, one of the Save the Coaster Committee presidents, recalls not only helping Cole power wash and paint the Giant Dipper, but also braving the ride with her friend from Coney Island once the coaster was back up and running.

"She was unimpressed by the Giant Dipper at first, but after she rode it, she was quick to apologize to me," said a chuckling Swink. "It's an exciting ride. But now, I'm at the age where I have neck issues, and I say, let's not tempt fate."

But the Ocean Beach resident admits she tempted fate a couple months back when Cole "twisted her arm" to come down for the inauguration of the newly painted coaster cars.

"It's an iconic image for generations of San Diegans who grew up coming to Mission Beach," said Swink.

When he has guests in town, Cole still makes an effort to visit the Giant Dipper, on which he took his first coaster ride at the age of 14.

"When I go down there now, and see the whole park is still running, I somehow feel like I played a key role," said Cole, now an honorary member of the American Coaster Enthusiasts. "Since it opened, every 10 years or so, it's gone through the same cycle of trials and triumphs. I love the way people still care about it, enough to keep it going. It's a magic roller coaster, that's what makes ours special."

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