

Information obtained about Playland Park and Patsy Cline appearance - May 31, 1959

After much research and the right connections, I was actually able to obtain the name and phone number of the former owner of Playland Park in Coopersburg, PA where Patsy Cline performed on Sunday May 31st, 1959. It took many attempts, but I was finally able to contact this then 93 year old gentleman who did open up to me and answered several questions I had for him concerning both the former park he ran and also the appearance of Patsy Cline there. He was also gracious enough to allow me to meet with him personally a few days later when I showed him my commemorative poster from the event and additionally received an impromptu tour of the remains of what was once the hot spot of the Lehigh Valley. Below are my findings I would like to share with everyone:

Playland Park was in operation from 1958-1980 on the outskirts of Coopersburg, PA. In 1956, the owner of the property noticed a free swimming pool nearby that was attracting crowds up to 1,000 people a day in a confined area. He then decided on building a bigger and better swimming pool/complex on his property and to charge admission. In 1957, he dug out and concreted a pool over one acre in size and added some bath houses, swings and food facilities for what became Playland Park in 1958. Admission was initially 25 cents for children and 50 cents for adults to enjoy this unique experience with (as advertised) "Acres of Sunning Space". I was told his park usually averaged about 450 people on a normal day and could easily hold 1,000+ comfortably, with parking initially available for 150 cars and then an additional field was used for overflow. Being the park spanned both sides of the road it was on, I was told admission was controlled by patrons having bracelets on their wrists.

Shortly after opening, a Pavilion was built adjacent to an existing structure that was able to seat 1,500 people on bleachers/benches and the Park had occasional entertainment during 1959-1960. I was told the original building that was connected to the stage and seating area was used as a beer stand and also for catered food. On Sunday May 31st, 1959 Patsy Cline and others (the owner does not recall who they were) performed two shows that evening. When I asked the owner his recollection of Patsy, the first thing he immediately said was that "she was a *really* pretty girl". He recalled she only sang about 4 or 5 numbers that night for each show and also went over and ate at the park Snack Bar between shows. There was nothing special about entertainers back then being shielded from the crowd at the Park, as I was told upon arrival they simply parked in the same area as all the other guests. The owner's wife (who passed away in 1998) who did all the cooking for the park food also was the one to do the bookings for entertainment. As a musician, I was wondering and asked him what the cost was to get Patsy Cline there, along with her crew and other performers for two shows? His quick response of \$900 floored me as that was a lot of money in 1959! I was also told by him the backup band for her was none other than Lehigh Valley Polka Legend Jolly Joe Timmer! After the short run of shows ended at the park, the pavilion area was used for storage and eventually torn down in 2000, but the original building that was part of the stage area still stands today.

The owner explained that he did "everything" back then including cutting grass, working the parking field, being a life guard at the pool, and also gave swimming lessons. He had a sister (then age 99) who still lived nearby and was also involved in the daily operations.

I personally collect Coopersburg PA memorabilia and also am a big Patsy Cline fan and have had this poster of her local May 31, 1959 appearance in my possession for years. It was only early 2009 before upon realizing that the 50th anniversary of this event was upcoming that I developed a two-fold mission:

- 1) I wanted to make the local community aware that someone of her stature performed here.
- 2) I wanted to hear from anyone (they would probably have to be age 60+ in 2009) who was at her shows and their recollection of the evening.

In doing my research for this, the most I was able to learn was hearing from one 61 year old lady whose parents went to the show but was told by them she was not allowed to go because she was too young being only 11 years old at the time! I also heard of a 79 year old lady (who was 29 at the time) who wanted to go but had just given birth to her 3rd child two weeks earlier and was at home with her infant and other two kids at the time. Our local newspaper also ran a mention of this event and additionally asked for a response from anyone who may have been there for her shows, but I am not aware of any replies they may have received.

When I asked the owner about his reason for the park eventually closing, he immediately mentioned the sales of drugs being discovered in the park. There was also too much "activity" now going on after hours as he mentioned kids would come by and knock down his fences to get onto the property to do whatever during the night. This was disturbing for him and his wife to deal with and he abruptly closed their family park in 1980.

I personally remember swimming there once in the mid-70's and whenever I now mention the words "Playland Park" to those my age (50+) I am often told by many that their parents or grandparents used to go there and often take them along. I am sure when I was there back then I did have contact with the owner and his wife but it is only now I can appreciate what an interesting person he was. In addition to having the vision to bring this idea of his to reality, he also was involved in the day to day maintenance of everything.

I had the opportunity to take many photos when visiting with him and although I did not capture the gleam in his eye when he first saw this 50-year old poster I brought with me of his accomplishment, my favorite photo is one of him posing with the poster for me. Not so much of him and the poster, but if you look in the background of the photo, there is artwork all along the wall and floors of his house. I asked him who they belonged to and he told me they were his. He said that at age 75 he took up painting and gives them away to people. I guess one is never too old to start something new. After all, he was already in his early 40's when the idea to start a park came to mind. After admiring my poster, I asked if he would be kind enough to sign the frame for me which he did. He put the poster on a table and moved aside a bouquet of silk flowers he told that someone had given him for his 90th birthday. While most of us would have treated something commemorating our 90th birthday as significant, he mostly brushed it aside as it was just another day. Shortly after, I went outside with him to tour the park remains and then he hopped on his tractor and told me he had to cut the grass - just like he's been doing there forever.

(The above Playland Park / Patsy Cline information was contributed by Lehigh Valley Piano Entertainer and Coopersburg resident Joe Lazarik.)