

Chapter 7

Kiddie Kingdom Is Born

All three of the Brothers, Joe, John and Paul had kids, and they all worked in the business during their school years. But, John's sons, Nick and John Jr. were the only two to show interest in the business and continued working in the business after they finished college.

One of Nick's fondest memories comes from a conversation that he, his brother John Jr. and their Dad (John) had with a man named Pete Bertalotti from Westmont. Nick and John were both teenagers at the time. During that conversation Pete asked what Nick and John Jr. were going to do that summer. Both said they would be working on the Carnivals. Pete then turned to John and said, "Oh, your sons work for you?" This took Nick and John Jr. by surprise, because they never had the feeling that they were employees. They waited to see what their father would say, and without missing a beat, John said, "No, my Sons work with me." That comment reinforced their feeling that they were part of the business, not just employees.

Both Nick and John Jr. were given major responsibilities at a very young age. Nick started in the ride division, and began moving rides while still in High School. He managed the crew, and even drove a semi-trailer from carnival lot to carnival lot. When he asked about the legality of driving a semi-trailer when he only had a regular driver's license, he was told "Don't worry, you don't need a Chauffeur's license to drive your own truck". He never learned whether or not this was true, or if it was just part of their way of giving him responsibility.

John Jr., on the other hand, was assigned to the tent division of the business. He had full control of the division and crew. He even had his own fleet of rolling stock to move the tents from location to location.

When they were first starting out, both Nick and John Jr. supervised crews that were many years their senior. One day, Nick was giving direction to an employee who said, "Who the hell made you Straw Boss." Nick's Uncle Paul happened to hear that comment, and said, "I did, and he just fired you."

So the die had been cast, Nick and John Jr. had full control of their crews, and the full support of the three Brothers.

In 1958, Nick married Sandra Sennebogen, and in 1960 John Jr. married Dolores Miller. Both women were welcomed into the business, each with their own responsibilities; Sandra in Nick's popcorn wagon, and Dolores managing John Jr.'s shooting gallery. Remember, money earned from these operations were not

part of the business, they were owned personally, and whatever was earned was theirs to keep.

As the years went on, Joe, John and Paul were getting up in age, and began to express an interest in slowing down. They loved the carnival business, and didn't want to get out of it completely. For many years they wanted to open a kiddie park, but just never got around to it.

The Dispensa's were not supervisors, they were workers. They didn't know how to direct a crew without being right alongside them lifting their share of the load. Nick realized that there was no way to continue in the carnival business without them being "under the iron". Some other plan was needed.

So, he devised a five year plan to move them from the carnival business to Kiddie Kingdom. The plan provided for two years of Kiddie Kingdom construction with the carnivals still operating at full scale. Then on the third year, Kiddie Kingdom would open, and both businesses would run in tandem for the next three years. During those three years, the carnivals would be slowly phased out and Kingdom operations would be increased. Then at the end of the five years, the Kingdom would be at full operation, and the carnival would be a thing of the past.

Of course, before anything could be done, the property had to be rezoned so that a Kiddie Park could be erected. A metrical part of the zoning process is the public hearing and Kiddie Kingdom's public hearing was quite unique.

The neighbors had seen Dispensa's Carnivals in the area for many years, they saw the toy operation, both in the original building and in the Castle of Toys. I'm sure many, if not most of them, shopped at the Castle. Yet when this new venture was announced, they came out in force to oppose Kiddie Kingdom. As a matter of fact, the first meeting had to be postponed because the assembly hall they selected wasn't large enough to accommodate the crowd.

As usually happens at zoning hearings, the residents were afraid of bringing something new to their community. There were two main arguments against bringing a kiddie park to the area. Both were based on the reputation that many carnivals and kiddie parks have. The first argument was that the food booth would bring rats to their community. Secondly, they said that the "carnival" would bring undesirable employees and that their children wouldn't be safe.

Had they been to any of the carnivals that the Dispensa Family ran over the past 50 or so years, they would have seen that there were no "carnival bums", and nothing but clean, well-run food operations that have passed, and will have to continue to pass DuPage County Health Department inspections.

Anticipating the opposition, the initial request sought a permit for only 12 rides and one food concession. The Family's architect (Otto Nerad) was on hand to answer questions about the quality of construction, and Al Woodward, the family's attorney was there to answer the legal questions. Finally, members of the

Family attended to answer any other questions the residents might have.

The Aldermen of Oakbrook Terrace could see the economic value of bringing Kiddie Kingdom to the city, but had to listen to the protests of their constituents. Finally, after a long drawn out process, the permit was issued.

Apparently, the residents were afraid of the unknown, because two years later, when the Family returned to the zoning committee to seek more rides, more food and to add games to the Kingdom, not one resident showed up to protest the expansion.

In some ways, operating the Kingdom was more difficult than the carnivals in that it was open long hours six days a week, whereas the carnivals only operated in the evenings for four or five days a week. But the main difference was that they didn't have to "move the iron" every week. Once the rides were set up in the spring, only routine maintenance was required until it was time to take them down in the fall.

John Jr. was a hands-on kind of guy. He was responsible for the construction of Kiddie Kingdom. He supervised the workmen, saw that everything was properly constructed and erected. He also took charge of seeing that all the rides were erected in the spring and dismantled in the fall.

After Kiddie Kingdom was in full operation, Joe and Paul were not comfortable working in the Castle because they were hands-on people, and spent the winter months maintaining the rides in the company's warehouse. John Sr., Nick and John Jr. worked in the store. Nick saw to it that the shelves were stocked and reorders were placed, and John Jr. took care of the train and hobby departments.