

## Amusement Parks Part 1: History, Chains, Design

### Amusement Park Chains

There are many amusement park chains in the US and around the world. We will focus on three of the largest chains with amusement parks that focus on roller coasters: Six Flags, the now defunct Paramount Parks, and Cedar Fair. Other chains like Disney or Universal will have higher attendance, but we won't go into depth with those (we will talk about Disney World specifically in Week 15).

### Six Flags

- Six Flags is one of the oldest amusement park chains, and one of the most well-known due to the high number of properties (all of which bare the 'Six Flags' name).
- The first Six Flags park was Six Flags Over Texas, located near Dallas, which opened in 1961. The park was originally a collection of shows and small flat rides, but began adding coasters in 1966 with the Runaway Mine Train (one of the first steel coasters in the world).
  - The name 'Six Flags' comes from the six countries that have owned that area of Texas: Spain, France, Mexico, Republic of Texas, USA, and the Confederate States of America. Hence, Six Flags flying over Texas.
- After being acquired by a railroad, Six Flags built two new parks, Six Flags Over Georgia and Six Flags Over Mid-America (now Six Flags St. Louis), in 1967 and 1971 respectively.
  - These three parks were the only three built by Six Flags; the rest were merely acquired
- Six Flags began expanding in the late 1970s and 1980s, buying parks like AstroWorld, Magic Mountain, Great Adventure, and Great America. They applied their Six Flags name to all of their projects. They also had some interesting failed projects, like an attempt to convert a former power plant into an indoor theme park in 1985.
- In the late 1980s, Time Warner began taking an interest in Six Flags, eventually signing a deal with them giving them access to the Looney Toon characters. Even today, most Six Flags parks have some kind of Looney Toons theming
- Around this same time, another chain called Premier Parks was rapidly acquiring amusement parks around the country. In 1998, they bought Six Flags, and in 2000, took the Six Flags name and applied it to their parks.
- At the turn of the millennium, Six Flags had roughly 30 amusement parks worldwide. Over the next few years, they made many improvements to their parks in an effort to make popular parks. However, the growth rate of acquiring parks and improving them had placed Six Flags far in debt.
- In 2004, they began selling overseas parks while on the brink of a revolt from their shareholders. After some change in management, they kept scaling back and selling parks, including 6 parks in 2007.
- These efforts couldn't save the chain from a recession and general decline in amusement park attendance, and they filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 2009. After restructuring, they left bankruptcy protection in 2010.

- Today, they have 13 properties in the United States (except Six Flags Mexico). The company is much more stable than it was and is on the upswing.
- Among the enthusiast community, Six Flags had a pretty negative association during the 2000s with their parks considered low-quality / effort parks that just had lots of coasters and nothing else (see *Scream! At Six Flags Magic Mountain*), but over the last few years this view has reversed, with some parks being praised.

### Paramount Parks

- Kings Entertainment Company (KECO) was an amusement park chain that was started with Kings Island and Kings Dominion, but later acquired 3 more major parks (Carowinds, Great America in San Jose, and Canada's Wonderland).
- In 1993, the company that owned Paramount Pictures bought KECO and renamed the chain Paramount Parks. The idea was to diversify their entertainment business and create a place to advertise their movies by making rides that were themed after the movies (like *Top Gun* and *Tomb Raider: The Ride*).
- While they ran their parks alright, they received criticism from enthusiasts for repeating rides across their parks (for instance, they built three copies of *Italian Job: Stunt Track* at different parks) as well as buying half-baked rides.
- Since Paramount's parent Viacom owned Nickelodeon, the parks in the Paramount chain usually had areas themed after Nickelodeon (previously Hanna-Barbera).
- In 2006, after a split in Viacom, Paramount Parks was sold to Cedar Fair in an effort to get rid of necessary assets in the company.
- Ironically, they are now building a Paramount park in Spain, with possibly two more coming in South Korea and London.

### Cedar Fair

- Cedar Fair started out as a single amusement park, Cedar Point in northern Ohio. The park still remains the chain's flagship park (more on CP below)
- In 1978, Cedar Point bought Valleyfair in Minnesota and formed the company Cedar Fair, a combination of the names Cedar Point and Valleyfair.
- The chain remained small until the 1990s when they purchased 4 more properties, most notably Knott's Berry Farm
- In 2006, it purchases the Paramount Parks, doubling its park inventory to 12. This is the number of parks it currently operates.
- Similarly to how Six Flags has the Looney Toons and Paramount Parks had Nickelodeon / Hanna-Barbera, Cedar Fair parks have the Peanuts characters (Charlie Brown and Snoopy), which are sometimes criticized due to their out-datedness
- After their acquisition of Paramount Parks, Cedar Fair got a reputation of being the 'best' amusement park chain (at least better than Six Flags), but over time this feeling has decreased some among the coaster community due to some decisions made by Cedar Fair (like running Geagua Lake into the ground or their 'Locker Nazis')