

Past the Point of No Return

by C.E. Holmes

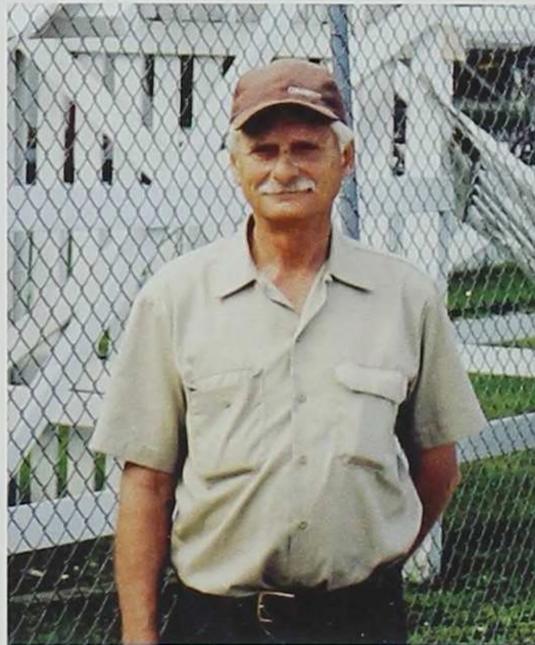
In Arnolds (no apostrophe, please) Park, a few feet from the shore of West Lake Okoboji (a glacier-scooped, spring-fed expanse in Iowa's northwest corner), the oldest wooden roller coaster west of the Mississippi wraps its way around oaks and cottonwoods, a Ferris wheel and a merry-go-round, and thrill seekers of every persuasion pursuing games of chance at a buck a pop.

Terry Mankle (*right*), a lean and weather-beaten kineticist (something he would never call himself) has been playing his own death-defying match against fate for more summers (30 and counting) than he cares to recall. Every morning, he takes his first sure-footed step on an undulating, lumber-framed tightrope of majestic proportions. What he's looking for, one step at a time, are wobbly spikes and signs of rot that, if allowed to loosen or spread, might make a jerking and jolting ride rougher and even life-threatening. Steadfast as a midwestern postman, Mr. Mankle is out there in all kinds of unpredictable weather, trying to deliver not a letter or a package, but simply an exciting but safe trip.

The view from The Point of No Return, the highest point on the coaster's circuit, is stunning, possibly even breathtaking, but Mr. Mankle seldom takes the time to pause and admire it. He has too many Capes of Good Hopes and Horns to round, and an entire roller-coaster route to circumnavigate before he arrives back at his home port, the boarding and exiting platform.

Mr. Mankle performs many other tasks in the amusement park, but his paramount mission is his

walking inspection of the tracks. He knows this roller coaster intimately. He appreciates the curves, he's in harmony with the bends, he's respectful of the hills. "I'm not afraid of heights," he tells us. "I'm just afraid of falling."



He has fallen just once.

It happened one morning about ten years ago as Mr. Mankle extended a tape measure out into space. Four feet was all he fell, but he hit his kidney hard on one of those innumerable crosspieces that, like femurs and rib cages for his riders, are the support structure that holds the whole organism together. He didn't pass out until after lunch. The perfunctory siren and the ambitious but ambivalent ambulance are only a faint memory.

His one-time fall is all water under the bridge to Mr. Mankle, who walks the tracks with a patient and unassuming authority. Forswearing any so-called higher education, he has schooled himself, from a variety of elevations, on what signs of trouble to look for. His main concern is for the well-being of his riders. He wants them to be able to raise their arms to the sky without fear as they shoot over hills and descend into dips.

For a clue to the antecedents of Mr. Mankle's roller-coaster fixation, one has to look no further than his own mother. She was, in her heyday, a reckless roller-coaster rider, and, according to Mr. Mankle, just a few weeks before giving birth to him, she

rode the original Arnolds Park coaster, a much higher and longer wooden affair, 16 times in one day. Pregnant women are no longer allowed to do such things (a stern and straight-to-the-point warning sign is posted at the entrance) and thus the dearth of humans capable of accomplishing what Mr. Mankle does, no doubt because of his womb-jangling experience.

Effortlessly and nonchalantly, Mr. Mankle walks the roller coaster every summer morning. We can only surmise, from our sheltered safe haven on the dry and level margins of these pages, the dangers compounded by wet, windy weather. His grip on the red-and-white railing must be that much tighter, given the inherent slipperiness of rain-slick painted wood. And if Mr. Mankle daydreams occasionally (as we all do, especially when we're on the job), are these daydreams put on hold due to the inclement weather as he makes his daily traversal? How fortunate it is that he doesn't have to deal with snow and ice (although the roller coaster in winter is indeed a pretty sight, especially when set against the frozen lake) because in that season, the coaster, like the beaver and the muskrat and the Loop-O-Plane operator, is in hibernation.

But, after all, it's the summer that we live for, because we love riding the old wooden roller coaster and leaving our troubles and frustrations behind us for a minute, more or less. And to ensure our dereliction from whatever plagues us, Mr. Mankle, with the demeanor of a battle-hardened soldier fighting a war whose outcome is always up in the air, has already prowled the catwalks that morning.

If he would only stop for 15 seconds on one of the hills, and turn his head, say 90 degrees, why, then he could see wind-scarred Fort Dodge Point and beyond that, Atwell Point, where President George H. W. Bush once walked on a flag-bedecked dock, and beyond



BOTH PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

Atwell, sandy Manhattan Point, where the Dixieland bands played on the wide veranda of the old hotel that once hung out over the lapping lake. But Mr. Mankle is on a spike-sinking sortie. Without turning his head or averting his eyes or reminiscing unnecessarily, he entertains valleys and comes into curves and slips over the slopes of this enchanting structure.

How the whole thing resembles the trajectory of a life!

We shall remain on the ground and tag along behind with our eyes. From far down below, we can only guess at the trouble spots that he looks for. It is essential that the track itself be made secure. Every ride exerts a certain amount of pressure on the rail. The passing cars are in danger of lifting off into orbit if the track does not remain locked to its frame. But there is a price to pay. What is lifted up must be pounded back down.

The crosspieces, and their shadows, how they all conspire to confuse our perceptions, crossing and crisscrossing, splitting apart and joining up in a jumble of angles and cubes! It's enough to drive even the most gregarious and devoted cubists among us to distraction.

We hold our communal breaths when we see how Mr. Mankle leans across the rails from the catwalk, planting one boot squarely across a 4x4 crosspiece. Raising the impervious head of his hammer (have we mentioned how his hand is as good as locked to its handle?) above a loose spike, he replants it, he re-sinks it, he re-embeds it, back where it belongs.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

How he hits the nail—seven, or eight, or nine times—each hit a direct blow. The spike cannot resist; it sinks back into the wood until it has the sound, sweet to Mr. Mankle's sense of hearing, of being driven in.

It's the resonance of all these blows that carries so deftly, like a strident church bell or a call to arms across the surface of the lake. People who are still sleeping will soon be awakened. A swift, hard hit of a hammer, sounding like it means business, has penetrated to the depths of their free-enterprise dreams and disturbed them, maybe even made them uneasy.

Despite having had to endure any number of managers, overseers, consultants, and supervisors, Mr. Mankle maintains a purposeful pres-



COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

ence as he goes about his job. Inspectors, of course, are always coming 'round. They conduct their inspections and then they put out bids to redo part or the whole of the coaster. In their reports they say that "the first hill is too bumpy" or "there's too much lift on the last hill." One inspector recommends replacing the $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch bolts on the tracks with ones that are $\frac{5}{16}$, while yet another says that "some structure should be added on that inside curve."

Mr. Mankle shakes his head and grins a tad derisively. "Inspectors!" We sympathize as he speaks of "how they do it with other wooden roller coasters." There was evi-

dently a wooden roller coaster out in Denver that had its own sawmill. Mr. Mankle cannot hide his enviousness: "They had an endless supply of 3-inch boards."

Now he hears that his boss wants to cut his hours back. Mr. Mankle shakes his head and suggests that "they might want to have a roller coaster fund raiser." Or perhaps a buried treasure may be unearthed from underneath the coaster—something that fell out of a wealthy but careless man's pocket, or a valuable ring that slipped off a sweaty finger—enough of a treasure, at any rate, to restore an old ride to solvency. Who knows what (and here we cast our eyes downward, in search of something shiny) might lie hidden in the dirt. Just today, in fact, Mr. Mankle has found on the side of the tracks a pair of purple-framed glasses, which look like they might have belonged to a young girl.

Speaking of glasses, and especially of eyes, Mr. Mankle took a tiny piece of steel in his eye one summer. He'd been working in the machine shop, and evidently not wearing protective glasses—"as I should have been"—when the wayward fragment became wedged in his eye. Dr. Gordy, the eminent Spencer eye specialist who lives on the north end of the lake, re-

moved it, but the procedure, admits Mr. Mankle, was painful. His sight is still affected. The sun and bright lights bother him, but not enough to slow or halt his progress. His inspection tour around the coaster still takes about 45 minutes.

We have many more questions to ask Mr. Mankle, but boy, is he busy! At this very moment, for instance, he's discovered yet another loose spike.

Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam!

The loose spike secured, he moves on, looking for others.

Watching Mr. Mankle make the final turn, with only three hills standing between him and the end of his route, we recognize the ridiculousness of questioning the motives of this passionate but somewhat subdued person's sense of purpose. And when that object of endearment just happens to be roller coasters—and not just any kind of roller coaster, but a wooden roller coaster constructed at the fulcrum of the Roaring Twenties and the Dirty Thirties—then you're either born with it, or you're not.

Mr. Mankle, just to be sure that all is in good working order, will now take himself on a test ride (an understudy will man the brake), and he will listen for suspicious sounds and make mental notes. And then at 11:00 a.m. CDT, the gates to the Arnolds Park Amusement Park will be unlocked and thrown open for another day, and the crowds will form long lines at their favorite rides, the first of which is the old wooden roller coaster. They'll rush up the ramp to the platform, and swarm for their favorite seats (there used to be a group that changed seats during the ride, but they've grown too old for such foolishness, as have the girls whom they were trying to impress). The bars will be lowered to keep the patrons square and secure in their seats. Then the brake will be pulled back, releasing the cars, which will fall down a short hill where the rotating chain will catch the cars and carry them up to . . . but you know the rest.

The man with his hand on the brake, waiting for the cars to return to their roost, may or may not be Mr. Mankle. If he's not manning the brake, then he's doing something else equally important. And yet all the time he is watching. His eyes, partially hidden under the brim of his cap, seem to take in all that goes on and around and up and down in the amusement park. His primary job remains making sure that the roller coaster runs smoothly, if that is the right word for such a bone-shaking experience.

And it will—the roller coaster will run unwrinkled—as long as Mr. Mankle is in charge of the proceedings.

Postscript—Summer 2010

We came back to Arnolds Park on Lake Okoboji for the 4th of July. On the 5th of July, we overslept, as was to be expected, so we did not get down to the amusement park and the coaster until 9:15.

As soon as we heard the hammering, we knew that something was amiss. It was not the same sort of pounding as before. It did not make impressions, like footprints in the sand, on our consciousness. There was no authority there, and the intimacy had vanished. We sensed that something had happened, that a change had occurred. Our suspicions were confirmed when a figure emerged at The Point of No Return. He was walking the route, but backward.

We sat on the seawall, camera in hand, unsure what to do next. When we heard the sound of the coaster coming, we turned our heads just in time to see a ghost coaster (cars empty of people) rattling past.

"Retired?" we echoed, after asking the unfamiliar man on the roller coaster platform where Mr. Mankle was. The word failed to syncopate for us.

How does a man who has spent most of his adult life as a Sherpa—in an amusement park on the American prairies—adjust to retirement?

To find the answer, we knew that we must seek out and talk to Mr. Mankle. It was suggested by a tattooed Miss Iceberg at the Sno-Cone stand, and confirmed by the phone book, that he resides in Spencer, Iowa—a flat, dusty, dry, landlocked, and roller coaster-less town 16 miles to the south, famous for its destructive fireworks, and for a cat who used to live in the library.

As you are reading this, we are on our way to Spencer. Fields of corn and soybeans surround us and threaten to swamp us if we stop to admire their fecundity. So no, we will not stop, we will keep going. Mr. Mankle, to fulfill the terms of his retirement, we presume, is reclining in his La-Z-Boy, its foot rest extended to its extreme extent. Whether or not he is watching the roller-coaster channel is anyone's guess. If the answer is yes, we hope he will mute it to tell us the rest of the story, outlining his coaster's hills and valleys that he knows so well, with those expressive, hammer-gripping hands. And we will report back (without ornamentation) about whatever became of this man who once walked past The Point of No Return. ❖

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