



Coaster company climbs high

Ashland business reaps benefits of amusement ride maker's success

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Times • Shamrock Writer
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AUGUSTAVILLE — Did you know the roller coaster business is booming in this part of Pennsylvania?

Surprisingly, that doesn't even include the famous rides that attract coaster enthusiasts and casual customers to Knoebels Amusement Resort in Elysburg each year.

Great Coasters International Inc., nestled midway between Trevorton and Sunbury in this Northumberland County village, has developed a reputation for designing and building world-class

wooden roller coasters. Its products are substantial attractions at destinations such as HersheyPark, Six Flags America and Dollywood.

Chris Gray, GCII procurement manager, touts his employer as the last design/build company for wooden roller coasters in the world. It's "the BMW of wooden roller coasters," he said.

This year, GCII will unveil its latest two coasters on separate continents. And, with the help of local vendors and employees, the coal region and Susquehanna Valley will leave their mark on amusement parks far beyond Pennsylvania.

In North America, GCII's 2,800-foot "Kentucky Rumbler" is set to open in May at Beech Bend Park and Splash Lagoon in Bowling Green, Ky. It features a 12-car, 24-passenger "Millennium Flyer" train, a unique GCII design the company says provides unmatched flexibility and comfort.

Halfway around the globe, GCII will unveil its other coaster, "Thunderbird," this spring at PowerPark in Alaharna, Finland, where two 24-passenger "Millennium Flyer" trains will roar along 2,700 feet of track.

Please see COASTER/Page A4

Ashland Technologies Inc. made most of the parts for "Thunderhead," the Dollywood roller coaster designed and built by Great Coasters International Inc., Augustaville.



COMING UP

■ Schuylkill YMCA schedules speaker for annual dinner.
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preserved must be part of the Agricultural Security Area, and a minimum of 250 acres from among all the participants is required.

The farms are then rated by quality of farmland with a

According to the SCC's Web site, "land conservation and quality of life issues in Schuylkill County are among the top priorities of creating sustainable and livable communities."

trict, because SCC is a non-profit organization, a monetary donation to help with operating costs will be discussed.

The SCC has no full-time staff, but instead uses volun-

"Often times farmland is being sold for development and negative environmental issues arise. Roads, water runoff and demands from school districts can be detrimental to the environment," Ewall

it may not guarantee the land will always be used for farming.

Stutzman said that other limitations can be added to the easement, depending on how it is written. This might eliminate future environmen-

just small farm or coal patch to more and more macadam and open areas. On der concrete an can't be reclaim

Coaster business succeeds

COASTER/From Page A1

Both coasters are laid out in the compact "twister" design, which features multiple crossovers. Their highest peaks exceed 90 feet, and top speeds approach 50 mph.

As the respective tracks near completion, so do the trains that will whip through their turns, rush up their peaks and plunge from their crests — sure to give passengers the thrill they seek.

'WE DO IT ALL'

This past week, the individual coaster cars sat motionless in the GCII building, awaiting shipment to join their tracks, as Gray spoke about his employer and his passion — creating wooden roller coasters.

"Every product we make is unique. We rarely duplicate a ride," Gray said as he walked down a hallway. Along its walls were photographs of the nine wooden roller coasters GCII has designed and built, including 2000's "Lightning Racer" and 1996's "Wildcat," both at HersheyPark.

"Everything you see — we do it all," Gray said.

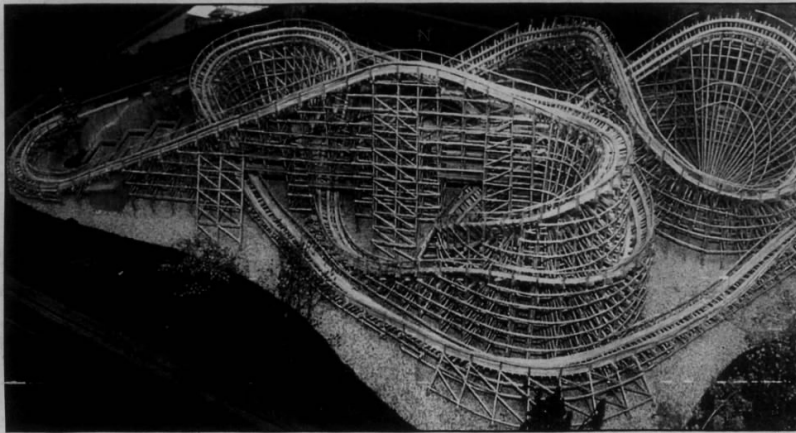
GCII designs the coasters, pitches the product to customers, assembles the coaster trains, surveys the site and constructs the wooden tracks. The entire process — from the contract signing to the time the keys to the coaster are handed to its owner — generally takes more than one year.

There is certainly much to do, with thousands of pieces. GCII receives two tractor-trailer loads of nails, two loads of nuts and bolts and 30 loads of lumber alone for each project. This is in addition to the weldments, machine parts and other equipment for the coaster trains, which alone take about six months to complete.

LOCAL HANDS

Most everything GCII uses in the fabrication of its 1,100-pound "Millennium Flyer" coaster cars is bought through local vendors and built with local hands.

"I'd say at least 90 percent of the trains and mechanical parts come from local vendors," Gray said. "We want the absolute best materials. You're dealing with people's lives, so you don't want



ERIC SCICCHITANO/Times • Shamrock Photos

A model of "Ozark Wildcat," a 2,600-foot "twisted track" that debuted in 2003 in Branson, Mo., illustrates the work done by employees of Great Coasters International Inc. The Northumberland County manufacturer has clients worldwide.



Chris Gray, GCII procurement manager, touts claims that his employer builds "the BMW of wooden roller coasters."

anything to go wrong."

One local business was able to expand last year because of its relationship with GCII.

Ashland Technologies Inc., of 32 Lehigh St., Ashland, began supplying machine parts to GCII in April 2002, said Bill Wydra Jr., company president. Three years later, it increased its production space by 2,500 square feet, purchased \$450,000 in new cutting-edge fabrication equipment, and hired additional welders and fabricators to produce the chassis for the coaster cars.

The first weld was made last May. Ashland Technologies employees spent the next 206 days plasma cutting, bending, machining and welding 6,537 parts to complete components for three roller coaster trains, the two for "Thunderbird" and one for "Kentucky Rumbler."

"This year is the first year we supplied an entire lineup of parts required for them to do the assembly" of the cars,

Wydra said. The assembly includes the main chassis, axles, machine parts and portions of the track's braking system.

AMUSEMENT 'OSCAR'

Outside of its business with GCII, much of what Ashland Technologies produces — such as a washer or a spacer — is a sub-component of a larger product. With GCII, employees of Ashland Technologies can look at and experience what they helped create.

Such is the case with the 3,230-foot "Thunderhead" at Dollywood in Tennessee, for which Ashland Technologies made most of the parts. This coaster debuted in 2004 and was recently named by an industry trade magazine, Amusement Today, as the best wooden roller coaster in the world, as determined through a poll of coaster enthusiasts.

Gray likened the recognition to that of an Oscar for those in the movie business.

Wydra and associates

eventually visited Dollywood themselves and took a ride on the finished product.

"This is the most enjoyable part of our job," Wydra said. "In this case, we make almost the finished product that we can sit on and ride."

Ashland Technologies itself is no stranger to international business. With products in more than 100 countries, Wydra said the company is something the area can be proud of. It currently employs 24 people full time.

"We plan to grow our fab and machining department over the next year with an estimated eight additional hires and \$300,000 in additional capital expenditures," he said.

In addition to Ashland Technologies, GCII contracts with Jeff's Auto Body, Paxinos, to paint its coaster cars.

GCII also contracts with Big B Manufacturing, Klingersdown; Martins Steel, Mifflinburg; Top Notch CNC Machining, Middleburg; and Custom Metal Coating, Sunbury.

FOUNDERS' PASSION

GCII was founded in 1993 by current president Clair Hain Jr. and Michael Boodley, widely recognized as the premier wooden roller coaster designer in the world. Boodley recently left the company.

Gray said Hain, who was born and raised in Northumberland County, began a career in coasters when he performed a work study on the "Phoenix" at Knoebels while in high school.

"He's been building rides ever since," Gray said.

Boodley got started even earlier. In 1975 at the age of 17, he set a world record for riding the "Cyclone" at Coney Island, Brooklyn, N.Y., for more than 1,000 circuits. He set a mark of 606 miles in 36 hours, according to published reports.

Gray said this duo brought both passion and knowledge to the table when they worked together. With Hain concentrating on building and Boodley serving as engineer, Gray said the synergy itself was innovative.

The company built its first coaster in 1994 and, once the current projects are completed, will have created 11 wooden coasters. It now employs approximately 10 full-time employees when a contract is active.

BREEDING FRIENDSHIP

Gray, 31, has been employed at GCII for about four years. He said he chose to pursue a career in the roller coaster business at the age of 8.

Standing near a coaster car bound for Europe, Gray spoke with a relatively new employee whose own interest led him to GCII.

Dan Comoss, 29, of Shamokin, first visited the business a short time ago, not to apply for a job, but to simply share his appreciation for the product. He and Gray struck up a friendship which, over time, led to employment as a car technician.

"We're here working on coasters, and to relax, we ride them," Comoss said, garnering a laugh from Gray.

"We go to Knoebels three nights a week when it's operating," Gray said. "That's like going to church."

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Eliminating terrorist leaders can backfire, experts say

TERROR/From Page A1

immediate impact could be seen in the streets of Pakistani cities, where thousands rallied, chanting "Death to America" in support of al-Qaida's "li-

keeps a movement going," said Jordan, whose 2004 study reviewed 72 international cases, stretching back almost a century, in which militant movements' leaders were targeted and killed

Sept. 11, 2001, U.S. terror attacks, analysts underscore an important emerging characteristic of the group: It seems to be growing more diffuse and decentralized, as seen in the unending carnage of