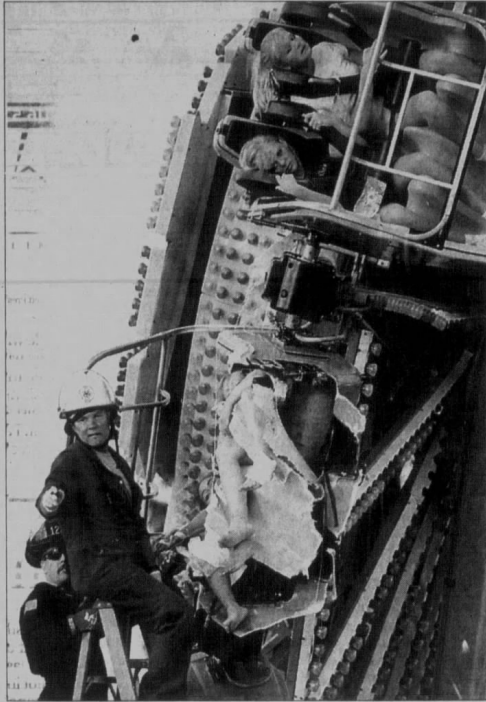


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BUSINESS

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Experts seek reasons for failed park rides



The Associated Press

The Chaos ride at Michigan's Adventure Amusement Park, near Muskegon, collapsed Monday, and 31 of the 33 riders were treated at hospitals.

Recent accidents were in Branson and Michigan

By RICK ALM
The Kansas City Star

Experts could find no mechanical reason for a recent roller coaster accident in Branson that injured eight persons, none seriously.

"We couldn't find anything wrong with the braking system," said Duane Compton, regional chief inspector for the Missouri Division of Fire Safety, which regulates amusement rides. "The only thing we cannot rule out is operator error."

Meanwhile, officials in Michigan were looking into an accident late Monday that sent 31 persons to hospitals for treatment. The Michigan amusement park was bought in May by Cedar Fair LP, which owns several U.S. amusement parks, including Worlds of Fun and Oceans of Fun in Kansas City.

In the Branson accident, the Firestorm ride's brakes failed July 21 at the Branson USA park, causing the three-car train to hit another parked on the same track as it entered the loading area.

Park manager Wayne Leatherman said the coaster had slowed considerably before the crash at the end of its run, which reaches a top speed of 40 mph.

The coaster was immediately

shut down under Missouri's emergency rule for amusement ride accidents. It was permitted to reopen Friday night. Officials said it was the first time the state's 1997 emergency ride-closure rule was used.

Compton said the operator of the ride had plenty of experience. "He was a seasoned operator who had been on that ride for two and a half seasons," he said. "He knew what was going on."

Park officials would not comment Tuesday on the ride operator's status.

Late Monday, an amusement ride at Michigan's Adventure Amusement Park near Muskegon sheared off its axle and crashed, sending 31 of the 33 riders to three hospitals. Three were kept overnight, one with a concussion.

Cedar Fair spokesman Brian C. Witherow said Tuesday that the company operated the same Chaos ride at parks in Ohio and Minnesota and that both had been shut down until they could be inspected for safety and possible design modifications.

Witherow stressed that rides at all six of the company's amusement parks are inspected daily.

Witherow said the Chaos ride was built by Chance Rides in Wichita.

Cedar Fair shares closed Tuesday at \$21.90, down 25 cents.

The ride has a large wheel that holds passenger cars at its rim, spinning horizontally and then rising to a vertical position as it gains speed.

Officials said the wheel came off its spindle and came to rest in a nearly vertical position, with some riders hanging sideways in their two-passenger cars while others were stuck at the top of the wheel.

Mike McFarland, who was standing next to the ride operator when the accident happened, said he was "shocked and terrified" because his 13-year-old daughter was on the ride. "They were lucky nobody got hit when it hit the ground because pieces were flying everywhere like missiles," McFarland said. "They got real lucky."

Rescuers had to wait three hours to remove passengers because authorities feared the wheel was unstable and would fall over, said Chief Kevin Blanchard of the White Lake Fire Authority.

Cranes and cherry pickers were used to remove people from cars that were high in the air. All but two of the trapped passengers were taken to hospitals. Some park goers said that the ride had malfunctioned earlier in the day and that customers were taken off.

Last week, two roller coasters collided at Canobie Lake Park in Salem, N.H., in a loading area accident that injured six persons, authorities said.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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