



Elizabeth Blay Maison Schelling
Local History Writing Contest

Leap the Dips

by Jonah Mullet

*2008 Elizabeth Blay Maison Schelling Local History Writing Contest
Division I Award Winner*

Have you ever had a roller coaster in your city? I haven't, but in 1909 the kids that lived in Mount Clemens, Michigan did. "Leap-the-Dips" was located on the Clinton River, between Dickinson and Crocker, on what used to be the Lonsby Lumber Yard. Many wooden coasters were made in this time period. They used a side-friction system with the cars traveling along a "trough" type rail, with the wheels underneath and side plates. An even better system was developed in the 1920s, which is what most wooden coasters today still use. There is another wooden roller-coaster called Leap-the-Dips located in Lakemont, PA. It was built in 1902 by the E. Joy Morris Company. It is the oldest standing roller coaster in the United States, and one of the only side-friction roller coasters in America. It is a lot like the Leap-the-Dips we had in Mount Clemens.

In the spring of 1909, the *Monitor* (Mount Clemens newspaper at the time), noted that the city engineer was looking at designs for an "electric park." Mount Clemens was in the middle of its "mineral bath" success, and a popular place for people seeking treatments in the baths, as well as other entertainments and diversions. The roller coaster "Leap the Dips" opened its gates on July 4th 1909. The *Monitor* stated that ten barrels of paint were used to paint the coaster! It quickly became a hit with children and adults. If you took a ride on the *Mineral City*, a popular 200 ft. excursion steamer which traveled along the Clinton River and Lake St. Clair, you would have been able to hear the laughter of children and parents enjoying the coaster. (See fig. 1)



Figure 1

The layout of the coaster is shown in the 1909 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of Mount Clemens, where it is labeled as Dip the Dips (See fig. 2). About two weeks after the coaster opened, the *Monitor* identified it by its real name, "Leap the Dips." According to the *Monitor*, business at local taverns was decreasing because of the coaster success.

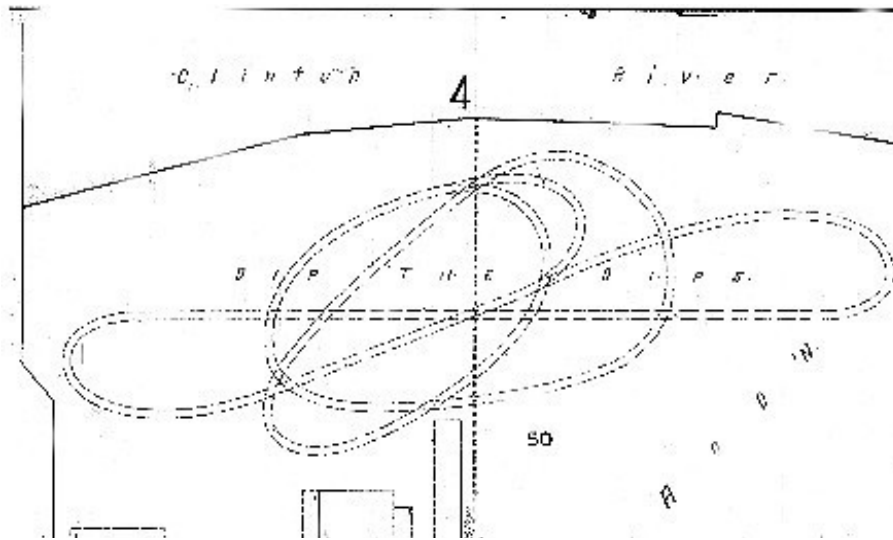


Figure 2

In 1910, only one year later, the newly opened Bijou Theater stole some of the fans of Leap the Dips. The *Monitor* observed that the theater provided different types and varieties of entertainment, while a ride on Leap the Dips was the same every time. Another reason for some of the loss of customers was because of the Mount Clemens Race Track. It was famous for its convenience of being so close to the city. In the winter there were horse races on the ice. A newspaper reported that drivers in illegal auto races "sped to bloody deaths."

Soon again in 1912, there was more trouble for the famed coaster. When Martin Crocker sued Ingersoll Engineering and Construction Co. of Pittsburgh, the builders of the ride and assignees of Charles Alexander because of problems with the payment of the land contract. The *Monitor* stated that the coaster had done "a good business for a short time, but

now bears the general appearance of a dead one.” In May 1912, the Mount Clemens Amusement Company was organized to operate the coaster and other projects. Martin Crocker was the major shareholder. Though attempts were made to bring back the coaster's success, it fell out of favor with the public, and by 1923 was declared unsafe. *The Centennial History of Mount Clemens, Michigan, 1879-1979* states that the old coaster was torn down in a very efficient manner – with the area kids knocking it down themselves and salvaging all the wood and parts for their own projects!

Leap-the-Dips was a great success that lasted for a short period of time. Mount Clemens is a city with a rich history, and we still continue to make history today. We still have fun yearly at that same spot as the Leap the Dips Roller Coaster with the Fourth of July fireworks and summertime concerts in the Riverfront Park. I wish that Leap-the-Dips was still around today so that my friends and I could ride it together.

For More Information:

The Centennial History of Mount Clemens, Michigan, 1879-1979, edited by Dorothy M. Magee.

<http://www.libcoop.net/mountclemens/leapdips.htm>

<http://www.libcoop.net/mountclemens/dulac.htm>

<http://www.wright.edu/~william.lafferty/v1n2page4.htm>

<http://www.rollercoastermayhem.com/sidefrictionarticle.html>

<http://www.ultimaterollercoaster.com/coasters/history/start/america.shtml>