

Gwen: Our first story takes us in pursuit of some very big game, hunting for evidence that these lion's paws once hung over the entrance to a famed amusement park: Coney Island, New York. At the dawn of the 20th century, this strip of land in South Brooklyn beckons to a nation struggling out of an economic depression. It promises a cocktail of fun and fantasy for the broiling masses of New York City. With its unprecedented mixing of social classes and sexes and its use of technology to create fantastic carnival rides, Coney Island redefines how Americans entertain themselves. At the heart of it all is Steeplechase Park, with its signature mechanical horse race. Some 70 years later, the ride ends when steeplechase shuts its doors. Almost nothing remains of that early magic. Now a New York City collector thinks he's found an artifact from those long-lost days when Coney Island captivated the world.

Jim: Coney Island has always had a magic for me. When I hold these paws, I think of a lion that must be as big as a two-story building, something that just wants to gobble you up.

Gwen: I'm Gwendolyn Wright. I'm teaming up for this investigation with a student filmmaker from Brooklyn, Sade Falebita. Sade?

Sade Falebita: Hi, Gwen.

Gwen: How are you?

Sade: I'm good. Nice to meet you.

Gwen: Very nice to meet you. I'm looking forward to this. Ready to go?

Sade: Yes. Is it okay if I bring my camera?

Gwen: That's a good idea! Let's get started. Hello, Jim, I'm Gwen. We're meeting Jim at his home in Pelham, New York. Oh, there they are.

Sade: Wow!

Gwen: They're enormous and pretty ferocious. So, Jim, what's the story behind these?

Jim: The story is that they were part of larger lions that were over the entrance to Steeplechase Park in Coney Island.

Gwen: They hung out over the entrance ready to leap on anyone that came in, huh?

Sade: How did you get them?

Jim: I bought them from the estate of Frederick Fried, who was the man who dismantled Steeplechase Park in the 1960s.

Sade: What made you want to find out about them now?

Jim: Well, you know, I spent a lot of time at Coney Island when I was a child. I'd like to have solid proof that these actually existed at the entrance to Steeplechase Park.

Gwen: well, I've always wanted to do a story about Coney Island. It transformed the nature of public

entertainment, and back then it wasn't for kids, it was for women and men of all classes.

Jim: Oh, that's true.

Sade: So, don't worry. We'll find out where your paws came from.

Jim: That would be great.

Gwen: What made you be interested in wanting to be a junior detective on a story about Coney Island?

Sade: I mean, I live in Brooklyn, so Coney Island is like my home. It's right around the corner, so to find out more about it is interesting.

Gwen: You like the probing and asking questions about things, too, I can tell. I'm glad to have Sade's help. If we do have part of a lion that guarded the entrance to Steeplechase Park, it's a potent symbol of a long vanished age, when the new century and the promise of technology offered the public a fantastical escape from the world of the ordinary. Coney Island's brightest light was George C. Tilyou, the owner of Steeplechase Park. He had made money as a kid by selling authentic Coney Island sand to tourists. Tilyou realized that whatever their social class, many people loved to be onstage, and he capitalized on making visitors part of the show. He also helped unlace the corset of Victorian sexual repression. At Steeplechase, strangers flirted with abandon and were jostled together on rides such as the Barrel of Love and the Human Roulette Wheel. Although critics brand Coney Island "Sodom by the sea," its popularity grows. In the early 1900s, Luna and Dreamland Parks join Steeplechase, adding glamour with elegant architecture and dramatic lights. At its height in the 1920s, a million people a day visit the several Coney Island amusement parks.

Sade: Our first step is to find out when these paws were made. That will tell us if they could have been at Steeplechase Park. We're consulting with Gwen's colleague, Dr. Richard Piper, at Columbia University's School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation.

Gwen: So, Piper, what do you think?

Dr. Richard Piper: Well, they're big, and they're surprisingly light, given that they're metal objects.

Sade: What do you think they're made of?

Dr. Piper: Well, I'd like you to test them, tell us exactly what they are made of. Why don't we use this x-ray fluorescence gun? It's a way of doing elemental analysis in identifying the metal. Hold it right against the surface here and press this trigger right here, and the results will come up on this screen. See that? See the "zn" right there...on the screen? That stands for zinc. These are made out of stamped zinc, and these pieces of stamped zinc have been pressed in dies to form a particular shape, and then they cut out the individual smaller pieces, and they solder them together.

Sade: During what time period do you think they would have used zinc?

Dr. Piper: Let's say, 1875 to 1925 is a good date...

Sade: Those dates are the right time period. The paws could have been at Coney Island. But Piper also tells us that zinc breaks easily when stressed and doesn't react well to temperature changes. I live in Brooklyn. Coney Island is freezing in winter and very hot in the summer. It seems that zinc would be a poor choice for a

sculpture.

Dr. Piper: The other issue with zinc is that it dissolves easily in acid rain.

Sade: Knowing the disadvantages of zinc, why do you think somebody would use it?

Dr. Piper: It was very cheap, and it was very malleable, so it was great for architectural ornament.

Gwen: At the turn of the century, zinc was often used for architectural ornamentation. And there's another clue that our paws were part of a sculpture. They were clearly designed to fit into something else: a lion's body, perhaps.

Dr. Piper: These mounting stubs were meant to slip into sockets so that these pieces could be mounted onto a larger piece, and that this piece was intended to be either disassembled either seasonally or periodically at least, and that's very unusual for an architectural ornament.

Gwen: Well, we've gotten a lot of important information. Thanks very much.

Dr. Piper: Thank you, Gwen, my pleasure.

Sade: Thank you for helping us with our investigation.

Dr. Piper: Thanks, Sade. Good luck on your search.

Sade: Thank you.

Gwen: You talk about these things being real light.

Dr. Piper: Here you go.

Gwen: So the dating and materials for the paws check out. Sade and I need to find out what happened to Steeplechase artifacts when the park shut down in the 1960s. We head back to the boardwalk to meet historian Richard Snow.

Gwen: Richard.

Richard Snow: Hi.

Gwen: Hi, good to see you.

Richard: Good to see you.

Gwen: This is Sade.

Sade: Hi, nice to meet you.

Gwen: Well, Richard, you are the person to help us with this really intriguing question, that we've seen these glorious pictures of Steeplechase at its height, magnificent buildings and glorious statues. What happened?

Richard: Well, remember, it did run for 70 years. That's not bad for an elaborate show, but the world changed. After World War II America moved to the suburbs, Disneyland is born, and everything from automobiles to movies are interesting people more than Steeplechase Park. And it basically was out-of-date.

Sade: Is there any specific reason why steeplechase shut down?

Richard: I would say, Tilyou's family started fighting among themselves. They didn't modernize.

Gwen: Sade's question is right on target. George C. Tilyou had lifted Coney Island to global fame through the force of his own personality. When he died in 1914, the spark of genius was gone. Although Steeplechase remained in the Tilyou family, none of them possessed his electric ability to make Steeplechase shine. That's what happened socially, but I want to know what happened to all that marvelous stuff. Where did it go?

Richard: You know, this park was just torn down like an old warehouse. It was scattered to the winds, and very little of it survives today.

Sade: I ask him if he knows about the guy who supposedly took our lion from Steeplechase, Fred Fried.

Richard: Yes, he was an advertising guy who got interested in Coney very early and saved a huge amount of material.

Sade: Did you ever hear of Fred Fried collecting a huge lion sculpture from here?

Richard: Gee, you know, Steeplechase was sort of like a magic zoo. It was full of carvings of wonderful creatures ranging from dragons to unicorns and plenty of lions. But whether he ever got any particular lion... I haven't heard of that.

Gwen: It doesn't seem as if we're getting anywhere. But then Richard tells us that the park had a legendary gatekeeper and custodian, a man who knew all the ins and outs at Steeplechase.

Richard: A man named Jimmy Onorato managed the park for the Tilyous for 40 years, and he kept a daily diary amazingly full. It has been published. If you can track that down, I think it would be an awful good place to look.

Sade: Okay, great. Thanks for the lead.

Richard: You're certainly welcome.

Gwen: Thank you, Richard.

Richard: You're welcome.

Gwen: Bye-bye.

Sade: Bye.

Richard: Well, good luck. I hope you catch your lion.

Gwen: We've come to the New York Public Library, where an impressive lion also stands guard. Look at this

lion. This is the kind of lion I'd expect to see in front of a major public institution at the turn of the last century. He was regal and calm. This is a lion protecting knowledge and power. It's pretty different from our lion, right?

Sade: It's very different. Look at the paws. These paws are not curved, they're more...

Gwen: That's right. This is a lion who's in charge of things. He's not attacking. Let's go inside. I can't wait to show you.

Sade: Okay.

Gwen: This is one of my favorite buildings in the whole world.

Sade: Really?

Gwen: Oh, you're going to love it. The library's Milstein Division has the full collection of Jimmy Onorato's Steeplechase journals. Hopefully, we'll find an answer about Fred Fried and our lion. So, let's see. "Steeplechase Park, the diary of James J . Onorato."

Sade: Well, these seem to be in chronological order, so I guess we could just find the time the Steeplechase shut down.

Gwen: Here it is. "Steeplechase Park, sale and closure, 1965-1966." Okay, this may have it. Onorato was a confidante of the Tilyou family, the very soul of steeplechase. He oversaw every detail of the park's maintenance for nearly 40 years, until it closed in 1964. If anybody knew about our lion, it would have been him.

Sade: "Cut firewood on our band saw for the last time." Wow. I mean, he must have been really sad about Steeplechase shutting down.

Gwen: I think so. "Daily report of sales of rides and equipment." This may be it. Okay.

Sade: Ferris Wheel, Roundup...

Gwen: Ferris Wheel sold for \$8,000.

Sade: And it says who it was sold to. Okay, let's see. "May 14, '65, Frederick Fried, lion." So here's our lion.

Gwen: Well, it may not be our lion, but we know he at least bought a lion. That's a good start. Remember, Richard Snow told us the park was crammed with ornamental animals, and there's no further information listed here. Did our lion guard the entrance to Steeplechase Park? We're at the Brooklyn museum to meet Charles Denson, author of "Coney Island: lost and found." Like Sade, he grew up in Brooklyn, indeed, at Coney Island, and as a child he also had a passion for taking pictures.

Sade: So, I mean, how was Coney Island like for you when you were a child?

Charles Denson: Well, Sade, it was the greatest place in the world to grow up. We had the entire amusement area as our playground, and a lot of it was filled with mystery, and when I was your age, I was always trying to solve these mysteries. And one of the things I did was to start documenting what I saw in the neighborhood, the changes. And as things were demolished, I would take pictures, and that's how I got

started documenting Coney Island. Here's one of the photographs I took when I was 12 years old.

Gwen: What he shows us is certainly going to interest Jim.

Sade: I tell Jim we got a picture from Charles Denson that finally answers his question. Actually, here's a picture of the lion right in front of Steeplechase Park.

Jim: Wow! Yeah, that's it. That's great.

Sade: That's the solid proof but... That's not all there is to the story.

Gwen: Charles told us that before it graced Steeplechase Park's entrance, our lion had quite a history, beginning not in Coney Island, Brooklyn, but in Imperial Germany as a plaything of the Kaiser.

Charles: It was part of the El Dorado Carousel, which was the most magnificent ride ever built. It was built by Hugo Hasse of Leipzig, Germany, and he built it for the Emperor of Germany. Now, the carousel itself was 40 feet tall, as tall as a four-story building, and it had three tiers, each moving at a different speed. You can see that it has roman warriors and peacocks and all sorts of figures. It's very elaborate. But the crowning glory of this pavilion was the golden chariot up on the top, and pulling that chariot are three large lions, and that's where your lion came from.

Jim: Wow!

Gwen: We tell Jim that the carousel came to Coney Island from Germany around 1910, to Dreamland Park, but barely escaped a huge fire just a year later. Ever the opportunist, George C. Tilyou bought the carousel and placed the lions over the entrance to Steeplechase Park, where they greeted visitors for the next 40 years.

Jim: That's great, and in fact, that's the type of drama that you'd expect George C. Tilyou to have created at the entrance to Steeplechase. Well, that's a great story. I didn't expect it to unfold that way.

Gwen: But it's wonderful. This goes from Europe to the United States, from an elaborate upper-class carousel to the entrance to good old Steeplechase Park. Well, I've got one more surprise for both of you, but you'll have to come with me someplace. Are you ready?

Sade: Yes.

Gwen: I have a surprise for Sade and Jim. I got a tip from Charles Denson at the Brooklyn Museum. Okay, now, take a look around. Look over that way.

Jim: Look, look, Sade.

Sade: Oh, my gosh!

Gwen: That is the other lion from the entrance to Steeplechase Park. Fred Fried donated one of them to the Brooklyn Museum, and he kept the other, and, Jim, your paws are all that's left.

Jim: It's really -- it's so spectacular.



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Brooklyn, New York**

Sade: And it looks so much better in person. Wow!

Jim: That's great. It's got such life.

Sade: It's better than in the photographs. I mean, you feel it.

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