

# MOUNTAIN

*Paramount Canada's Wonderland, York Region's third largest employer, celebrates its 20th season*

*"You're going to make it after all!"*  
— lyrics from the theme song for the Mary Tyler Moore show

BY PATRICK CASEY  
Staff Writer

Exactly 19 years to the date 12,000 people strolled through the gates on a Saturday opening day. Paramount Canada's Wonderland continues to be one of York Region's biggest success stories.

Faced with massive criticism from the Toronto financial district, mixed with fears of noise, traffic congestion and a loss of innocence within the Maple community, Wonderland unveiled its 148-hectare, \$122-million theme park on May 23, 1981.

Taft Broadcasting Co., a Cincinnati-based radio and TV station and owner of the Hanna-Barbera animation creations, teamed with Winnipeg's Great-West Life Assurance Co. on the massive project, whose proportions dwarfed the weekend carnival venues and made the Canadian National Exhibition look like a backdoor sideshow.

## SUCCESSFUL EVERY YEAR

Wayne Gretzky joined Jabber Jaw, Fred Flintstone and Yogi Bear in a photo session at the park, which featured the 45-metre man-made Wonder Mountain and four themed roller coasters — including the 31-metre Gold Rusher and the massive Great Canadian Mine Buster, manufactured and installed by Holscot Construction Ltd. of Richmond Hill, who won the original roller coaster contract.

But at \$19.99 a day per person, many wondered who would go.

"When the project broke ground in 1979, the Bay Street naysayers were out and about, giving us two years to survive, at best. Putting \$122 million into a theme park raised a lot of eyebrows," explained David Phillips, last week, Wonderland's public relations manager. "But every year, it has been successful."

"It says a lot about Taft because they did exhaustive research when they looked north of Toronto. They knew that if you build it and build it right, people would come. If they had skimped and cut corners, we wouldn't be around now because you don't get a second chance."

But despite annually drawing three million visitors to Wonderland — located between Rutherford Road to the south and Major Mackenzie Drive to the north and between Jane Street and Hwy. 400 — the destination has witnessed its share of ownership movements and controversies, including a Wonderland Gay Day, where protesters warned incoming visitors at the front gate. First, Great-West Life backed out of the

arrangement and Taft Broadcasting took over full control of the park through a spin-off company called King's Entertainment Co. And by the late 1980s, Markville Mall owners JDS Investments joined Bramalea Ltd. and took over Wonderland, leaving a 20-per-cent share with King's.

But by August 1992, trouble with the real estate market forced the new owners to seek out Paramount

Communications, who invested \$400 million as the park flourished through parent company Viacom Inc.

Today, Wonderland features North America's greatest variety of roller coasters, including Top Gun, Canada's only inverted looping jet coaster fashioned after Tom Cruises' portrayal of a Navy pilot in the movie of the same name. According to Phillips, Cruise visits Wonderland — in disguise — each summer.

"Everything was a challenge in the early days, but with Paramount and Viacom, it has been a natural fit," he said. "That ownership strengthened it and gave us the vision to go

forward."

Before Wonderland's emergence, Maple was a tiny farming community with less than 1,000 residents. Today, it's a sea of homes to more than 30,000 people and expected to grow by another 15,000 newcomers.

And to the locals, Maple is home to two solitudes — Canada's Wonderland and Canada's wasteland, the Keele Valley landfill site, the country's largest dump that will close by 2002.

"Unlike the dump, Wonderland has taken its responsibility very seriously and it has helped put Vaughan on the map," pointed out Mario Ferri, a Maple councillor who

moved to the community in 1984. "The dump has negatively impacted our quality of life, where Wonderland offers employment, tourism and entertainment."

"I'm actually thankful to Wonderland. Because of them, I had a place to move to. Without the park, Maple would not have developed the way it has and it has certainly upgraded the value of the land. And for the young people of Maple, this is their only outlet for entertainment."

"If you are under 16, this is the centre of the universe."

Ferri even credits Wonderland officials with playing hardball at the Ontario Municipal Board against residential developments surrounding the park. Because of them, he says, developers were forced to ante up \$1 million for buffers and sound barriers to ward off potential noise complaints from future homeowners.

In 1981, resident Glen Norcliffe was quoted calling Wonderland "ugly and spoils what use to be quite a nice view of forests and fields."

However, local ratepayer groups today have few complaints.

David Frattaroli, president of the Maple Springs ratepayers, says Wonderland is as important to the area today as it was in 1981, when he was an 11-year-old boy living next door to a theme park.

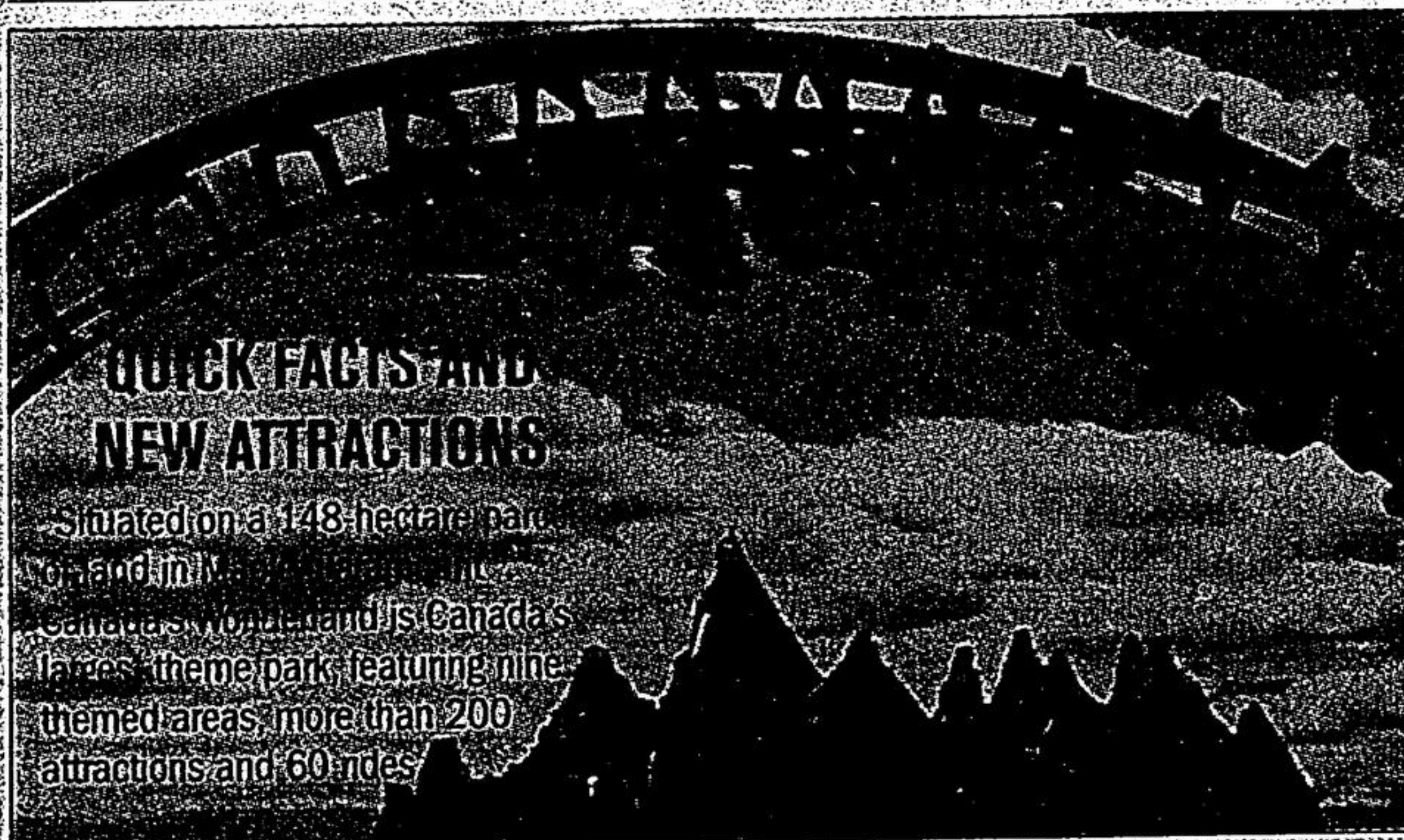
Meanwhile, Wonderland's debut followed 26 years after Disneyland opened its gates in Anaheim, Cal., but Phillips believes the Canadian version captured lightning in a bottle north of the border.

"We definitely were not the first to get going, but people watched and saw theme parks as something that's powerful," said Phillips about a business that attracts 4,000 summer jobs, making the park Canada's No. 1 employer of seasonal students. "People want a place to go after work or school, relieve the stress and let the imagination fly."

"Wonderland had a vision, jumped on Canada and, 20 years later, it's bigger and better."



At left: Wonder Mountain under construction in 1980.



Between May 7 and Oct. 8, the park will host more than three million visitors this season.

Wonderland employs 4,000 seasonal workers and 160 year-round employees.

Wonderland is operated by Paramount Parks, a unit of Viacom Inc., which currently manages King's Island theme park in Cincinnati, Ohio; King's Dominion in Richmond, Va.; Great America in San Clara, Cal.; and Carowinds in Charlotte, N.C. In addition, the firm operates Star Trek: The Experience at

the Las Vegas Hilton.

An individual season pass costs \$84.95; a family season pass for four costs \$264.95; and \$42.99 for an adult day pass.

To celebrate its 20th anniversary, Wonderland has added six new attractions this year, including the launch of Cliffhanger, which takes passengers through snap rollovers and 360-degree twists and turns as they propel through moments of zero gravity and an inescapable wall of water.



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