

BEHIND The scenes

Let new season of fun begin

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Staff Writer

The grounds were a dead calm.

Cars, minivans or Jeeps were not packed like sardines in the parking lot and there was no stampede at the entrance gates.

There was no traditional-sounding theme park music wafting through speakers.

Not a squeak was heard from running coasters or children's squeals of delight filling the air.

There wasn't even an hour-long wait in the queue line or the distinct and pleasurable smell of funnel cake.



Contractor Kevin McAdie (top) secures the canvas covers for a children's ride, while Jordan Hartley and Tom Ritchie stock shelves.

Trees lay unplanted in the limestone streets, garbage rangers were overturned and four men from Northern Lights Painting and Decorating were painting flower bed rails in front of a merry-go-round in Hanna-Barbera Land.

Several mechanics were suspended along the track of a child's coaster adding final touches.

Beside the Pizza Pizza location at Zoom Zone, an electrician was taping up wires, while other contractors were laying the cement.

Over at The Bat, landscape architects were laying the final two limestones in place on a square-shaped section of the pathway while welders kept busy at Shockwave securing together a piece of the ride's queue line.

That was the state of Canada's first national theme park on a windy and partly cloudy Tuesday.

But all that changed last weekend.

Sunday was the first day Paramount Canada's Wonderland opened its gates to the public for the 2001 season.

But for the 120-odd days the Vaughan-based park is open, it takes months of preparation and research to get ready for the more than three million people who will visit the 379-acre park this year.

"The idea is to keep giving them a reason to come back," said park communications and special events manager Kris Williams, adding around 60 per cent of visitors are season pass holders.

"We try and understand what our guests are looking for. We'll try and get into the mind of a four-

year-old or a teen and determine what is fun and funky and fashionable for them."

For example, Williams said park research has shown brand-name labels, such as Nike and Reebok or Pizza Pizza and Yogen Fruze, are what guests want.

And the park has been catering to that demand for the past four or five years, she added.

Park employees at Character House in Hanna-Barbera Land, were busy stocking store shelves with paraphernalia, such as key-chains, stuffed Scooby-Doo's and Dino's, T-shirts, stickers and water bottles.

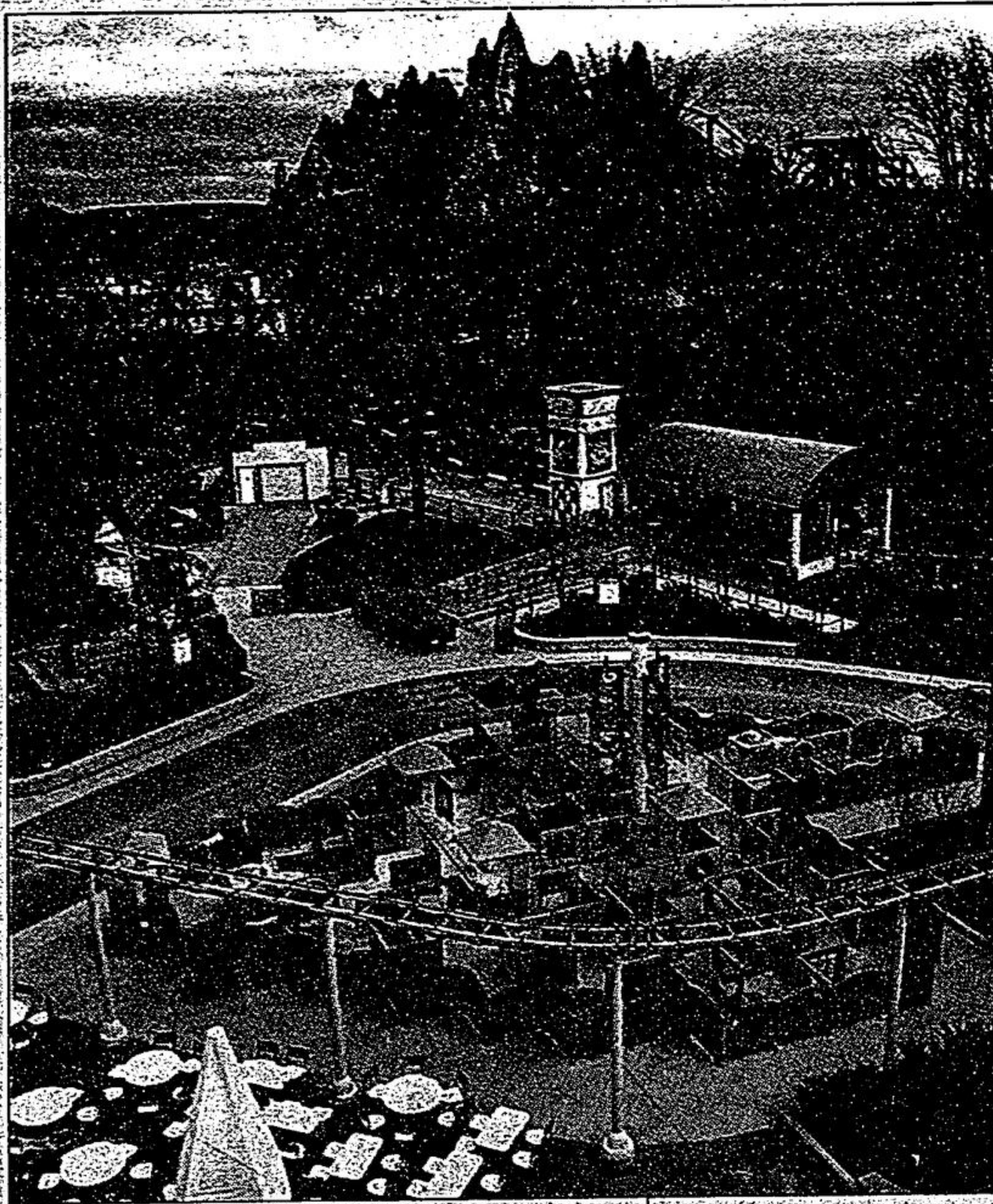
"We don't just have the local souvenirs but other staples as well," Williams said. "We also have the branded items consumers are looking for. If they want to shop, they'll shop."

Williams said the more than 100 full-time and 4,000 seasonal staff members are committed to providing guests with the ultimate theme-park experience.

"It's not just a job for them. What they do comes from the heart and they want to do something satisfying to our guests," said the spokesperson, explaining full-time staff will begin preparing for the 2002 season mid-summer.

Each department, whether its attraction is food, merchandise or entertainment, go through a lengthy preparatory process, where seasonal staff, such as students or seniors, are hired and trained, Williams said.

During the off-season, ride



STAFF PHOTOS/MIKE BARRETT

All is ready for opening day at Paramount

Canada's Wonderland (above). Glen Vranckx (right) replaces damaged stones in time for the more than three million people expected to pass through the park's gates this season.



units are removed from the track and reassembled.

"If it's not safe, it's not fun. That's the bottom line," Williams said. "We need to be ready in every capacity. It's not just flipping on a switch opening day."

For thrill and adventure seekers, this season promises to be an exciting one.

This year marks the first time the park, which celebrates its 20th anniversary this month, will offer more new rides than ever before.

New attractions include Shockwave, the world's greatest spinning ride, which throws riders 70 feet in the air while rotating and looping 360 degrees, the high-flying inverted kid's coaster with a helix, Silver Streak and legendary comic book creator Stan Lee's 7th Portal, a 3-D ride simulator based on a popular webstrip.

For those who don't like hairpin turns or gravity-defying twists, not to worry.

Williams said the park offers something for everyone's enjoyment, including new entertainment shows, such as Scooby-Doo and the Ghost in the Attic and Graveyard Shift, which features singers and dancers performing "ghoulist" hits, from classic rock to contemporary.

Williams dismisses the idea a person has seen or done all the theme park has to offer.

"Every year, we set the bar to try and outdo ourselves from the year before," she said. "We know through research what we have to do to provide the best entertainment value and I think we do that."

For more information about season passes or operating hours, call (905) 832-7000.

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