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"Dancing fountains" on the Plaza at Kemah Boardwalk.

On the Boardwalk, in ...
Texas



Kemah makes the most of its Boardwalk, attracting 3.2 million annual visitors. The appeal of a boardwalk is sensual and a bit intangible, says an author, the joining of natural, man-made. Landry's Inc. Kemah Boardwalk

Little Kemah, Texas, could teach Atlantic City a thing or two about year-round, family-friendly boardwalks.

By Suzette Parmlay
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

KEMAH, Texas — Not all boardwalks are created equal.

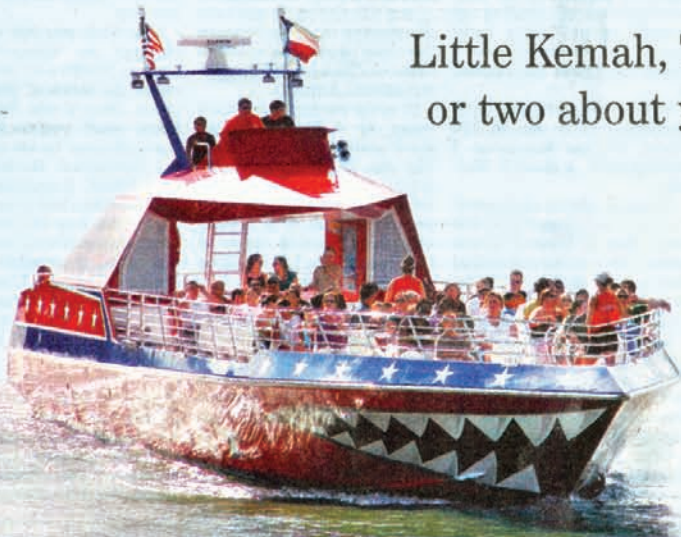
There is one along Galveston Bay in Texas where the Boardwalk Bullet coaster reigns supreme, accelerating riders up to 51 m.p.h. and culminating in a gut-wrenching 96-foot drop.

I braved the Bullet, but not until I had taken in the rest of Kemah Boardwalk, home to 10 themed restaurants; a 52-room boutique hotel; 13 amusement

rides; and a 424-slip marina that features a 149-passenger, 117-foot luxury yacht for bay cruises.

I lunched on grilled mahimahi and shrimp at the Aquarium Restaurant, where the room centerpiece was a 50,000-gallon fish tank filled with everything from tropical fish to sharks. The balcony had patio tables overlooking Clear Creek Channel, which connects Clear Lake with Galveston Bay, and provided breathtaking views.

Afterward, I fed the stingrays at Sting-



The Boardwalk Beast boat ride takes you out into Galveston Bay at 40 m.p.h.

On the Boardwalk, in Kemah city

ray Reef — a 19,000-gallon tank where southern and cownose stingrays come right up to your hand to be fed and petted, like water puppies. I must say this was an exhilarating experience. I went from being squeamish to wanting a pet stingray for my home. I was informed by chief biologist/caretaker Aaron Sprowl that stingrays have no teeth, only cartilage, and the ones in the pool are conditioned to swim over a guest's hand to remove fish. Once I got that into my brain, I put a tiny silverside between my knuckles in a clenched fist, placed my hand all the way in the water up against the wall, and waited for the stingrays to come eat. When one finally did, I breathed a sigh of relief that all my fingers were still intact.

The stingrays had a slippery texture, like a wet rubber mat, and after I petted a few, I tried to look closely into their eyes to see if they were enjoying the attention. They seemed to.

Other exhibits featured red-bellied piranhas and bamboo sharks. Those you didn't touch, only ogled through their glass encasements.

Retail shops form a semicircle around the Plaza — the heart of Kemah Boardwalk that's next to the Boardwalk Inn and is home to the "dancing fountains," often used by kids to cool off; the entertainment stage for live bands; the Aquarium Restaurant; and Stingray Reef, and is also the turnaround point for the C.P. Huntington gas-powered train, one of the Boardwalk rides. I took my time walking in and out of the shops, which offered everything from Christmas ornaments to T-shirts.

I stopped at Sweet Scoops for a scoop (just one, really) of "Southern Hospitality," vanilla ice cream with chunks of pineapple, roasted pecans, and a strawberry soft swirl. I was told cheerfully by the assistant store manager, Richard Folland, 20, with a cherubic face, to "Have a sweet day" as he handed me a waffle cone. It tasted a lot like a banana split without the banana, and it was heaven under the blazing Texas sun.

"People love to dine and play near the water," Mark Kane, who oversees Kemah (KEE-mah) Boardwalk, said about what's attracting an estimated 3.2 million annual visitors to this tiny Texas town.

"And there are plenty of national events and conventions in Houston, whose attendees end up on the Boardwalk," he said. "We appeal to everybody."

The 60-acre boardwalk draws visitors from around the world 363 days a year — closed only on Thanksgiving and Christmas — and offers a snapshot of what Atlantic City could become as a year-round family-friendly destination under New Jersey Gov. Christie's overhaul of the Shore resort.

The Atlantic City Boardwalk has a lot of similar potential, said the man behind Kemah, Tilman Fertitta, chief executive officer and chairman of Landry's Inc. He recently purchased the former Trump Marina Hotel Casino in A.C. and is remaking it into a Golden Nugget Casino Resort.

"The Atlantic City Boardwalk is an American icon with a storied history," he said. "Given the proper dynamics, I believe that every major city with waterfront property has an opportunity to capitalize on their location, and make it an appealing destination for families to visit."

Kemah, like other great boardwalks, has a timeless and intangible appeal, said James Lilliefors, author of *America's Boardwalks: From Coney Island to California*.

"Boardwalks were the forerunners of theme parks, the mega-shopping malls, and other big-scale attractions," he said. "But it was never replaced by those."

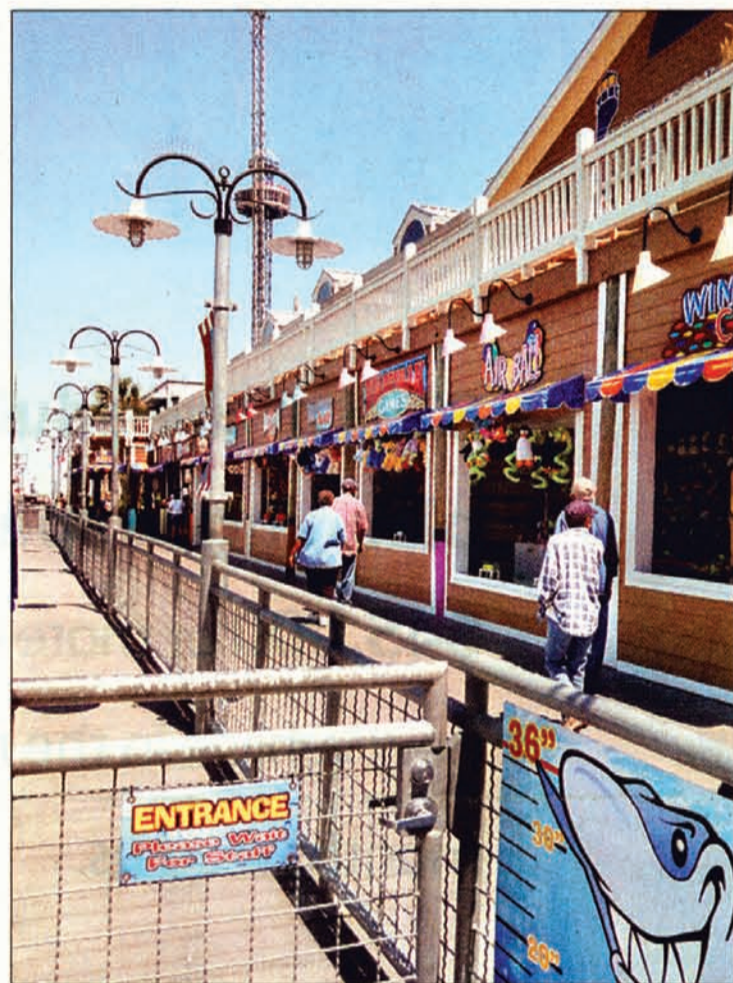
Lilliefors, who used to live in Ocean City, Md., and visited the Jersey Shore frequently, added: "The greatest appeal of the boardwalk is largely sensual and a little intangible — the confluence of natural and man-made attractions you don't find in a shopping mall. They have a timeless quality, and they preserve traditions at a time where we are a culture of franchises and quick fixes, such as fast food. Some of the best boardwalks have no franchises or very limited franchises."

The Atlantic City Boardwalk, the oldest in the country, opened in 1870. But it could learn from its young Texas counterpart, as far as broadening its appeal to both adults and children.

After all, a Jersey boy oversees Kemah Boardwalk as its general manager. Kane, 57, grew up in Freehold, N.J. (he was born in Northeast Philadelphia). In 1976, Kane took a job at Six Flags Great Escape in Jackson, N.J., as a games operator. He worked his way up while attending Glassboro State University, now Rowan University, becoming president in September 2006. Landry's Inc. of Houston,



Interior of Aquarium Restaurant on Kemah Boardwalk, which serves seafood in a sea-themed decor, with views of enormous floor-to-ceiling tanks and a centerpiece 50,000-gallon fish tank.



Games along the Kemah Boardwalk, which also features rides, shops, an entertainment stage, boating, and the hands-on Stingray Reef.



SOURCES: Esri; TeleAtlas The Philadelphia Inquirer

which owns 250 restaurants nationally and the Kemah Boardwalk, recruited Kane in October 2010, and he headed south.

Kemah, the town, was founded in 1898 by John Henry Kipp, a veteran of the Magnolia Rangers, and James H. Bradford. But it wasn't incorporated until 1965 after enduring financial and natural hardships.

Tourism, boatbuilding, and commercial fishing helped the town's population grow to about 1,300 by 1922. During the 1930s Kemah was Houston's playground, with wide-open gambling, drinking, and prostitution.

Longtime Kemah resident Matt Wiggins' grandfather began operating a cafe on the bottom floor of the Edgewater Casino in 1950, and called it Jimmie Walker's Edgewater Restaurant and Supper Club. It closed down in 1954 because of gambling, and later a fire. After surviving two hurricanes and bankruptcy, the Wiggins family reestablished the restaurant as Jimmie Walker's in 1987.

Two years later, Landry's Inc.'s Fertitta persuaded the family to sell it to him, and he renamed it Landry's.

From there, Fertitta's baby — Ke-

mah Boardwalk — sprang up. He put in several Landry's restaurants, and when deciding on the rides and games, Fertitta said he got advice from his four children.

"Houston is a very family-oriented city," he said. "It's home to one of the largest ports in the United States, and we saw the opportunity to create an exciting destination."

Author Lilliefors added, "One of the qualities you find on boardwalks and not in a lot of other places is that parents bring their children and put them on the same rides they were on as children and get some of the same foods."

"You can go back in time," he said. "There is no entry fee to go on a boardwalk, and there is a constant parade of people going on. There is something unique about the combination of the open air and mini-mall, but it's right on the water and has a certain quality that never goes out of style."

"There is a mysterious, intangible appeal to boardwalks that continues to attract new generations. It's something nostalgic. It's just an environment you can make what you want."

Part of that appeal is the rides, and Kemah's biggest draw is the Boardwalk Bullet. As I got into my

Kemah Boardwalk

■ Kemah Boardwalk offers lodging, dining, shopping, rides, games, and free summer concerts.

Where it is: Kemah, Texas, 20 miles from downtown Houston, minutes from NASA's Johnson Space Center.

Where to stay: The 52-room Boardwalk Inn includes four luxury suites. In summer, rooms go for \$149 Tuesday and Wednesday with a bay view; \$259 Friday; and \$269 Saturday. Prices lower in fall.

Where to eat: Aquarium Restaurant, Saltgrass Steakhouse, Landry's Seafood House, Lighthouse Buffet, the Pizza Oven, Bayside Grille, Flying Dutchman, Joe's Crab Shack, Cadillac Bar, Red Sushi, and Sweet Scoops.

Where to shop: Treasure Chest Gift Shop, Blayne's Fashions, Boardwalk Fun Shirts, Boardwalk Supply Co., Christmas at Kemah, Kandy at Kemah, Surf's Up, Kemah Country Store, Thomas Kinkadee Gallery, Toy Crossing, and Violets are Blue.

What to ride: Boardwalk Bullet, C.P. Huntington gas-powered train, 36-foot multilevel carousel, 65-foot Century Ferris wheel, Wipeout, 140-foot Drop Zone, Pharaoh's Fury, Inverter, Aviator, Red Baron, Balloon Wheel, Boardwalk Bouncer, and Boardwalk Tower. Prices range from \$3.50 to \$5 per ride; an all-day ride pass (does not include the \$5 Boardwalk Bullet) is \$16.99 (under 4 feet tall) or \$19.99 (over 4 feet). Boardwalk Beast Speedboat Thrill Ride, on Galveston Bay, is \$15 for adults, \$12 for 12 and younger.

Where to play: Midway games; arcade; playground.

Phone: 1-877-285-3624.

On the Web: www.kemahboardwalk.com.

— Suzette Parmley

seat on the wooden train — which I found out was manufactured by the Philadelphia Toboggan Co., based in Hatfield, Pa. — I could feel my pulse quickening. After I was fastened in, and the train began to roll out, I grabbed hard onto the bar in front of me. Kane, seated to my left, seemed to relish seeing fear grip my face.

The roller coaster seemed to go as fast as, well, a bullet, twisting and winding for more than 3,500 linear feet. I spent much of the ride positioned on my side, at a 45-degree angle. I screamed at the top of my lungs after we reached the peak at 96 feet — and it dropped — all the while looking into Galveston Bay, which connects to the Gulf of Mexico. Before the 71-second thrill ride was over, the Bullet had crossed over itself 43 times.

Kane described it as "a big coaster in a small footprint." I was just grateful I didn't lose my lunch.

To calm my nerves — and water can do that — I took a seat on the 200-foot-high tower ride, called Boardwalk Tower, to enjoy panoramic views of Galveston Bay.

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