

Introduction

Through the Turnstile

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Let's begin by free-associating for a moment. If I say, "Hersheypark," what pops into your mind? Perhaps a rollicking roller coaster where riders scream in ecstatic terror prior to entering a monster loop, spiraling corkscrew, or sudden plunge? Or maybe you imagine a seven-foot chocolate bar who spreads good cheer by posing for photographs with children and smiling incessantly, as frowning is an anatomical impossibility? If your mind conjures up images like these, you are not alone. Hersheypark has earned a reputation for its roller coasters and chocolate-themed fun. At the risk of oversimplifying, one could boil down the park's strategy to a basic mathematical equation: *chocolate theming + thrill rides = success*. Given this formula, the following piece of information may surprise you. Until a very recent renovation (more on that below), the Hersheypark experience did not begin with either strolling product characters or the slightest hint that colossal coasters lay ahead. Instead, visitors encountered something unexpected, curious, and perhaps mildly disappointing.

Fake European architecture. Before guests could reach the rides and attractions they came for, they first had to pass through two unavoidable themed areas built in the early 1970s. Tudor Square presented the architecture of England during the reign of the Tudors (1485–1603), which included Queen Elizabeth's ascendancy to the throne, William Shakespeare's plays, the defeat of the Spanish Armada, and the first English colony in North America. After exiting one Old World area, visitors advanced to a second one. Rhineland recreated traditional German architecture from the 1700s and 1800s, a period that witnessed the heavy migration of Germanic people

to Pennsylvania. In this way, Hersheypark's layout resembled an hourglass. The large volume of humanity streaming in from the parking lot was channeled through a narrow passage honoring English and German heritage. Then, as unwanted constriction gave way to welcome expansion, visitors finally reached the fantasia of fiberglass, chocolate, and steel that is twenty-first-century Hersheypark. With their eyes lit up in anticipation, visitors fanned out to revel in the wonderful problem of having too many choices for their amusement.

What did recent visitors to Hersheypark make of Tudor Square and Rhineland? We don't know, but we can make a pretty good guess. If we had accosted parkgoers to inquire, most of them, even those professing a love for history, would probably have judged the two areas to be harmless but out of place in a park that was so obviously themed around candy and famous for its thrill rides. If we had been so persistent as to press guests further, many might have expressed mild surprise not just that Tudor Square and Rhineland existed, but that they enjoyed privileged locations at the entrance. Should a day at Hersheypark really begin with European history? For close to fifty years, it did. From 1973 to 2019, guests experienced Tudor Square and Rhineland first—if, that is, they were paying attention.

Few were. Many visitors blew right past the European twins on their way to their favorite attractions. This behavior did not upset Hersheypark in the slightest. Long ago, it abandoned the vision that had brought these themed areas into existence. In recent decades, the park used the buildings not to showcase history but to sell stuff—souvenirs, T-shirts, candy, and snacks—none of which had anything to do with European heritage (except possibly German Kettle Korn). In short, Tudor Square and Rhineland had become architectural anachronisms.

Hersheypark put them out of their misery in 2019. That year, the park launched a major renovation of its entrance, a massive construction project that converted the plot occupied by Tudor Square into a hard-hat zone. In 2020, Hersheypark unveiled a brand-new themed area in that spot—Chocolatetown. With this addition, Hersheypark was doubling down on its two chief areas of strength: chocolate theming and roller coasters. Now, as guests enter, they are greeted by friendly Hershey product characters and enjoy several options to consume chocolate treats. Chocolatetown is also home to Candyonium, a serpentine steel leviathan that the park promotes

as its “tallest, fastest, longest and sweetest coaster.” What fate befell the old European attractions? Rhineland was absorbed by nearby Founder’s Way, losing in the process what remained of its identity. Tudor Square was demolished.¹

Yet there was once a time when Hersheypark officials envisioned Tudor Square and Rhineland as exciting new attractions that could lure millions through its gates. In the early 1970s, their European architecture graced the folds of glossy promotional brochures and appeared in television spots across the mid-Atlantic region. Back then, it was the structures belonging to Hershey Park (1906–71) that had to be torn down to make room for Tudor Square and Rhineland, two new themed realms within Hersheypark (1971–present). This book concentrates on that 1970s transformation, explaining how Hershey Park (two words) became Hersheypark (one word).

Behind that simple keyboard maneuver lies a fascinating story. It involves not only the subtraction of old rides and the addition of new ones but something much larger: the evolving relationship between a company and a town. That relationship started back in 1903 when the confectioner Milton S. Hershey, whom many referred to as “M. S.” in his time, launched a courageous and mostly successful experiment to reimagine industrial capitalism. Our story focuses on the 1960s and 1970s, a stormy period in that town-company relationship during which a problem forced both sides to make a difficult transition. Upon first glance, this problem does not seem very problematic at all. For six decades, the chocolate company and town adhered to an economic model that worked *too well*.

If that does not sound much like a crisis, just wait. It was. During the industrial revolution of the late 1800s, violence roiled the United States as corporations and organized labor engaged in constant warfare. In the early 1900s, Milton Hershey (hereafter “M. S.”) joined other industrialists in seeking an answer, one that would restore peace to society while maintaining productivity at factories. He deployed what was, at the time, a progressive solution to this destructive conflict—paternalistic capitalism. A variety of quid pro quo, M. S.’s paternalism worked something like this. His chocolate company did not merely offer workers a wage-earning job and then leave them to fend for themselves in all other aspects of life. Instead, his company took care of its workforce. In a carefully planned community, workers inhabited nice homes with affordable mortgages, paid

minimal fees for subsidized utilities, benefited from free snow removal and garbage collection, partook of easy transportation along company trolley lines, and enrolled their children in quality schools free of charge. For their leisure, they enjoyed multiple recreational and cultural venues such as a zoo, pool, museum, sports arena, library, community center, and theater. Most remarkably, M. S. opened Hershey Park in 1906 for the pleasure of chocolate workers, their families, and the local community.² It occupied the core of his vision. M. S. may seem absurdly generous, and perhaps he was. That said, this was a reciprocal relationship, and his employees owed him something in return. They were expected to work hard, exhibit company loyalty, practice clean living, and refrain from the disruptive strikes that had destabilized or destroyed other companies. M. S. was not the only industrialist to attempt this bold experiment. However, most other company towns made critical missteps and failed to survive. Today, we see them only in our history books.

M. S. beat the odds. He proudly referred to Hershey as “an industrial Utopia,” a “town that has no poverty, no nuisances, and no evil.”³ Though this statement oozed with hyperbole, there was truth in it. Hershey *was* a nice place to live, work, and raise a family, and most residents *did* feel privileged to settle there. What was the secret to Hershey’s success? To put it simply, M. S.’s agreement with his workers was not merely transactional. Both parties not only accepted the reciprocal agreement; they fiercely embraced it as the source of their happiness, stability, and prosperity. Recognizing that the special relationship was what set them apart from other towns, the company and community even based their identities on it. In this way, what had begun as a quid pro quo evolved into something much stronger—a sacred trust that we can call a *compact*.

Hershey Park played a crucial role in the perpetuation of the compact. For decades, residents would arrive at the park with their picnic baskets, send their kids off with a pocketful of dimes to enjoy rides, tap their feet to rousing band music at the Bandshell, cool off in the colossal swimming pool, and close out the day by dancing under the stars in the open-roofed ballroom. The town adored Hershey Park and positively reveled in this summer ritual year after year. For that is what an outing to the park was—a ritual. Indeed, behind what seemed like frivolous fun, something meaningful was taking place. For both the company and the community, Hershey Park

symbolized the compact, and, as such, it provided a performative space on which each side could act out its commitment to this vital trust. By staffing, maintaining, and updating the park, the company signaled its compliance with the compact. By patronizing the park, the members of the community reciprocated, performing their acceptance of the compact's conditions. "The park was genuinely for the workers at the chocolate factory" and "the families in town," a Hershey resident recalled. "The love of the place used to tie it together."⁴ The operative word here is *tie*. Through Hershey Park, a company and community solidified the bond that enabled them to coexist in a state of peace, prosperity, and contentment that extended beyond the death of M. S. in 1945.

But all good things must come to an end.

In the 1960s, the winds of change blew through Hershey. When they did, they upset a local community that had become too dependent on the company and too inured to the status quo. Much of the change was brought on by external economic forces. In the 1960s, the business climate favored those corporations that understood the massive influence of television and could successfully leverage the power of advertising, marketing, and public relations. While most companies adapted within the shifting environment, Hershey Chocolate chose stasis. Its business practices remained largely unchanged during the two decades following the death of M. S. At a time when many companies were hiring Madison Avenue firms to orchestrate slick marketing campaigns, Hershey did not even advertise its products—that is, until an aggressive rival applied pressure. In response to a fierce challenge posed by Mars, Hershey Chocolate finally woke up in the 1960s. The company hired young MBAs to restructure its business operations, converting the lumbering dinosaur into a modern corporation capable of competing. As a second source of change, Hershey executives supported the construction of a state-of-the-art hospital and medical school—the Milton S. Hershey Medical Center—that attracted outsiders to what had become an insular town. As people of various ethnicities and political orientations moved in, the community howled in protest. The company also—and this was crucial—decided that M. S.'s model of paternalistic capitalism had outlived its usefulness. In a move that shocked residents, the company cut the umbilical cord, so to speak, by discontinuing most free services and amenities. It terminated the compact.

The worst was yet to come. Hershey Park, the centerpiece of M. S.'s vision, had deteriorated over the years. By 1970, it had degenerated into what one executive called "an iron park with a bunch of clanging rides and some picnic space."⁵ After intense internal debate, the company elected to subject the park to a complete overhaul. The revamped amusement park would be enclosed in a fence, charge admission for the first time, and cater to regional tourists and those from New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington, DC. Except it would not be an *amusement park* any longer. Hershey hired a California-based design firm, Randall Duell and Associates, to transform it into a *theme park* in the mold of Disneyland.

In 1955, Walt Disney unveiled a new and radical form of entertainment. Instead of offering the typical roller coasters and carnival rides of an amusement park, Disneyland invited guests to enter themed realms that used sophisticated Hollywood set designs to place them inside 3D movies. The appeal was powerful and immediate. When it opened, Disneyland probably delivered more smiles, laughs, and screams than any physical space in human history up to that point. It also generated staggering revenues. That said, Walt Disney aspired to more than mere profits. According to cultural historians, Disneyland presented guests with a symbolic landscape, one that served Walt's political agenda during the Cold War. He conceived of, and his "Imagineers" designed, themed realms that could retell legends and myths from America's storied past, honor small-town American values, and shape American dreams for a technological future. "There's an American theme behind the whole park," Walt Disney explained. "I believe in emphasizing the story of what made America great and what will keep it great." By deploying symbols and narratives within these themed realms, Walt Disney hoped to inculcate his patriotic message during the Cold War.⁶

Disneyland's stunning success spawned imitators. Regional theme parks, such as those in the Six Flags franchise, proliferated in the 1960s and 1970s. Modeled off Disneyland but smaller in scope, these parks also entertained visitors by thrusting them into themed environments. Though joining this wave, Hersheypark differed from other theme parks in one critical sense. While those parks were built solely as moneymaking ventures, it is the contention of this book that Hershey executives, along with pursuing profits, were actuated by a social conscience: they wished to help a

struggling community adapt to unwanted change. Working collaboratively with Randall Duell and Associates, the Hershey leadership imagined the new park as a symbolic landscape. Like Disneyland, Hersheypark would present visitors not just with a zone of amusement but with a rhetorical space that would engage in an act of persuasion.

Persuade visitors of what? In the wake of the terminated compact, Hershey executives hoped to convince residents who resisted change to make the necessary psychological adjustment. Toward this end, the park placed guests in a sequence of historically themed areas that created the illusion of time travel. No mere passive observers, guests became actor-participants in immersive environments depicting various historical stages. Their journey through time began across the Atlantic with the aforementioned Tudor Square and Rhineland, recreations of two Old World cultures that influenced Pennsylvania. The progression through history carried guests next into themed areas standing for the town of Hershey's past, Pennsylvania's agricultural heritage, and the region's industrial past and present. Hershey's Chocolate World, which opened in 1973 just outside the park, contributed to this story by depicting chocolate production, as did rides themed around coal mining. Finally, guests encountered contemporary attractions, engineering marvels that symbolized the promise of the modern world. The overarching message of Hersheypark was a simple one: change, not stasis, defines civilization. Residents would see "transition in the architecture of the park," explained one Hershey executive, "and be comfortable with change in their world."⁷

Clearly, Hersheypark in the 1970s bore little resemblance to the modern theme parks that readers are familiar with. Today, theme parks attract millions of people by delivering on their promise to submerge guests in wonder worlds inhabited by the wizards, monsters, pirates, costumed heroes, galactic rebels, and the animated characters of their favorite movies. This strategy has been highly successful: in 2024, it contributed to a global theme park industry that exceeded \$70 billion in annual revenues.⁸ Given the focus on fantasy we see today, many readers will be struck by the design of Hersheypark in the 1970s. It featured history, not fantasy, and was animated by a community-centered vision. No other theme park, past or present, is anything like Hersheypark. It possesses a unique creation story that deserves to be told in a book.

This is a book about a company, community, and park facing challenges during a difficult transition. It differs from other histories of regional theme parks in that it is concerned with more than the rides and attractions inside the park. Make no mistake: those attractions matter. However, they matter because they play a role in a larger story. Indeed, for many of the park's attractions, both new and old, I was able to locate their significance by situating them in this narrative of social, cultural, and economic change in Hershey. To tell that narrative, I read extensively in local newspapers and conducted interviews with key players involved in the redevelopment. I also availed myself of the extensive holdings of Hershey Community Archives, an indispensable resource for any historian studying Hersheypark. During multiple visits, I reviewed company records, internal reports and memos, schematic renderings of planned attractions, fan mail, complaint letters, newspaper clippings, and press releases. Most importantly, I was able to listen to authentic voices from the past. In the 1980s, the Archives launched an oral history project that is still ongoing. Thanks to this remarkable collection, a researcher can access the memories of Hershey executives, company employees, and town residents who lived through this period of change.

The changes of the sixties and seventies transformed Hershey. By the end of this turbulent period, the town and company had found a new equilibrium, and Hersheypark had discovered the lucrative potential of that simple formula: *chocolate theming + thrill rides = success*. However, as we move forward in this book, we simultaneously shoot backward in time. The first sound we hear is not the laughter of children high-fiving a walking Hershey bar. Nor is it the screams of riders on a death-defying looping roller coaster. Instead, we hear the blithe organ melody wafting out of the Carrousel's calliope. This mingles with the rousing trumpets, clashing cymbals, and pounding drums reverberating from the Bandshell, where hundreds have gathered to hear a military band play everyone's favorite Sousa marches. It is summertime in Hershey. As chocolate workers spend their day off at Hershey Park with their families, they revel in the knowledge that life is good. They are unaware that, in the future, when change comes, they will feel intense nostalgia for perfect days like this one.