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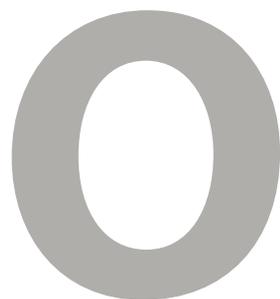
SCREEN GEMS

26 Drive-In Theatres That Keep the Night Bright

B-MOVIE, BE MINE



SALTAIR AND CARNIVAL OF SOULS



On a lonely night in 1961, Herk Harvey was driving back to his home in Lawrence, Kansas, from a job he'd just finished in California. Harvey was a movie maker—but not the Hollywood kind. He worked for the Centron Corporation, a leading producer of educational and instructional films. The thirty-seven-year-old director liked his job, but he had never made a theatrical production.

BY **ROBERT KLARA**



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Fifteen miles out of Salt Lake City, Harvey followed old US Highway 40 as it veered to the left and crossed some abandoned railroad tracks. That's when he looked out the window and saw the building that would change his life. "I saw an abandoned amusement park called Saltair," Harvey, now deceased, recalled in a 1990 interview. "Well, with the sun setting and with the lake in the background, this was the weirdest-looking place I'd ever seen."

Entranced, Harvey parked the car and walked the weedy viaduct a mile out to Saltair's gates. The pavilion lay like a slain dragon in the dusk, 150 feet wide by 350 feet long. It had once housed the largest dance floor in the world.

But now, five years into its abandonment, it was, Harvey thought, just "spooky." Crumbling domes stood astride the entrance arch, which leaked the smells of timber, brine, and lost summers.

What a great setting for a movie, Harvey thought.

It would not be the first or the last time that Saltair—or, rather, one of them, for there

have been three—has haunted and inspired those who've laid eyes on it. As anyone who's ventured out onto the abandoned Asbury Park Casino on the Jersey Shore knows, when mortals raise buildings over the water, lots of people come, but only the ghosts stay. It was as true in 1961 as it is today—and it's never truer than at the Saltair.

The romantic and risky idea of building an amusement palace over the Great Salt Lake began in 1891, when the Saltair Railway and elders of the Mormon church hired architect Richard K.A. Kletting to create a day resort with all the flair of New York's Coney Island—but without the booze and painted ladies. "He was to create a grand building to stimulate visitors—even overwhelm them," says John McCormick, author of the book *Saltair*, "temporarily transporting them out of their everyday world into another realm."

Kletting drove two thousand pilings into a shallow-water alkali flat and proceeded to erect a sultan's palace of onion domes, minarets and arch-and-lattice promenades. It was



THE GREAT SALT AIR

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like a piece of the *Arabian Nights* come to life in Utah. "The suspicion," wrote the *Deseret News* that year, "that what one saw was not firm structural reality, but rather a delightful Oriental dream." People called it the Pleasure Palace on Stilts—and people came by the thousands. The Salt Lake & Los Angeles Railway, formerly the Saltair Railway, transported them from downtown Salt Lake. A day of bobbing in the water (its twenty-seven percent saline content makes it impossible to sink) and a night of dancing ran fifty cents—including the round-trip aboard the tiny railroad car.



SALTWATER CIRCUS: From the mid-1890s to the mid-1920s, Saltair Pavilion reigned as the most popular family destination west of New York. Resting on more than two thousand pylons driven into the bed of Utah's Great Salt Lake, the exotic amusement mecca encouraged countless thousands to dance, revel, and swim. Saltair boasted the largest dance floor in the world. Following a 1925 fire, a second pavilion was built. Movie director Herk Harvey made extensive use of that ballroom in 1962, when he filmed the cult classic *Carnival of Souls* and depicted the dance palace as an arena of the damned.

It was pure magic, and it ended on an April afternoon in 1925, when a carelessly laid welding torch started a fire that burned Saltair to the waterline. Investors quickly rebuilt the pavilion in 1926, sinking \$750,000 into another phantasmagoric structure on the same spot. People returned—mainly by car, this time, taking the Lincoln Highway into the town of Magna, then back-tracking four miles to Saltair. Thousands of families drove to the lake each summer, some from as far as California. In 1950 one of these families included Rollin Southwell, who'd later become a celebrated Utah historian.

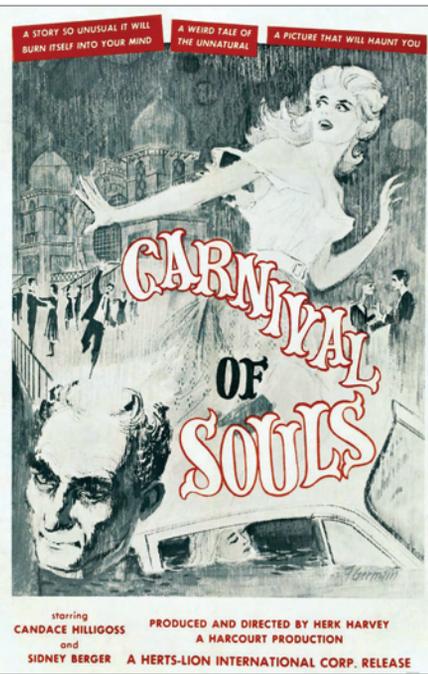
"I was a fourteen-year-old kid, and I saw the first two-piece bathing suit in my life," Southwell says. "It was yellow. I'll never forget it." But Saltair II's timing was poor. It had limped through the privations of the Great Depression, then World War II, its crowds growing smaller each season. By 1958 the pavilion closed for good.

To make *Carnival of Souls*, Herk Harvey took a three-week vacation from work, used local "actors," and shot on 16-MM film—all on a \$17,000 budget.

Harvey had talked a coworker into penning the script: A young woman dies in a car accident and comes back—not knowing she's dead—only to be pursued by ghouls who make their headquarters at (guess where?) the abandoned Saltair pavilion. The performances were starchy, delivered over an irksome organ soundtrack. The Saltair scenes, however, with their broken glass and eerie shadows—the terrifying majesty of an abandoned building so huge—made it an unforgettable film. It was unfortunate that, after a brief run in drive-ins during 1962, the film was largely forgotten. Harvey didn't know it, but his movie also became an unwitting documentary: An arson fire obliterated Saltair II in 1970.

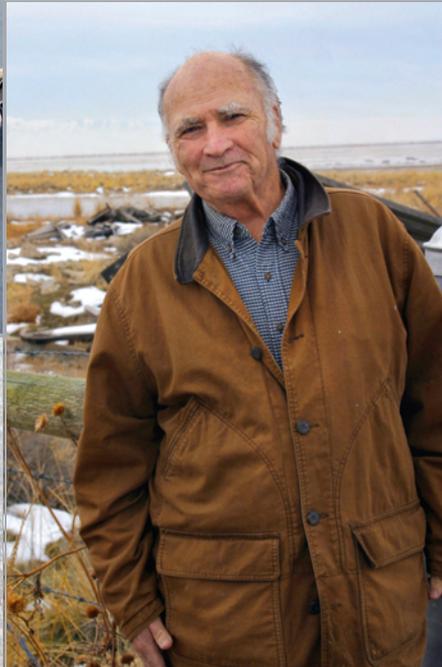
In 1981 a new group of investors emerged and raised the third and present Saltair, about a mile west of the original site. The six golden domes and entrance archway notwithstanding, the place looked a bit like an Air Force hanger—probably because that's what it had been. Still, its backers restored the long-dormant amusement park as part of the new pavilion, and people were hopeful.

If those same people had known that the water level in the Great Salt Lake had been rising steadily since 1963, they may not have



DANCE OF THE DEAD: In *Carnival of Souls*, little-known actress Candace Hillgoss essayed the role of Mary Henry, a church organist who finds herself trapped in a nightmare. Herk Harvey himself played the part of The Man—a pasty-faced harbinger of doom who haunts Mary throughout the story. At the time of the filming, Saltair had been abandoned for years.





THE CONTINUING CARNIVAL: Saltair Pavilion survives in its third and final form [below] while memorabilia enthusiasts celebrate the park's earlier incarnations. Among the vintage souvenirs collectors find are ornate spoons. Lincoln Highway historian Rollin Southwell [above, right] still haunts the grounds on occasion, undoubtedly still searching for that striking yellow bikini.



felt that way. By 1983, record snowmelts and rainfalls swelled the lake nearly three-fold. Sandbagging worked for a while, but by 1986 the waterline had risen by twenty feet, swallowing Saltair's dance floor and sending waves through its front door. (The author, who took a swim in the Great Salt Lake around this time, remembers that detail personally.)

Some people said it was stupid to have built a pavilion out on the lake—but McCormick says, "This is a question of hindsight being twenty-twenty. [The flood] was a once-in-a-lifetime event. As Governor Matheson said, "This is a hell of a way to run a desert."

Fortunately, another group of investors stepped forward to run Saltair when the waters receded. Today, the huge building is a concert venue, having hosted the likes of Bob Dylan and the Black Crowes. Local resident Sarah Baker has seen several shows at the current Saltair—where the stage lights are only part of the spectacle. "With the overwhelming smell of the Great Salt Lake and the constant mist in the air," she says, "concerts are an experience I'll never forget."

Salt Lakers themselves haven't forgotten the first two Saltair pavilions, either. The Inn on the Hill bed and breakfast—a resplendent 1906 mansion where Baker works as the assistant manager—has a Saltair-themed room. ("One of our most requested," she says.) And, out at the shore, a few relics remain, too: some of the original Saltair's pilings, a power house, a shell of the train car that shuttled out over the water to the place where the Mormons met the Moorish.

And, of course, there is *Carnival of Souls*—today, a cult classic. In one scene, the undead protagonist, Mary Henry, is driven by an elderly minister out to look at Saltair's ruins. "This used to be quite a place," he tells her, the wind tousling their hair. "It's been deserted a long time now."

"Will you take me in?" Mary implores. "Goodness no—it's not safe out there anymore," says the surprised prelate. He pauses, mulling a thought, and then asks, "What attraction could there be for you—out there?"

Mary doesn't answer. She doesn't have to. For anyone who knows the story of the Great Saltair, no answer seems necessary. ♥

ROBERT KLARA is an *American Road* editor, a New York City based writer, and the author of the book *FDR's Funeral Train*. Screen captures appear courtesy the Criterion Collection DVD release of *Carnival of Souls*. Additional photos by City of West Wendover and *American Road*.