

1910

The Mill Mountain Incline Rail and the Jefferson Theatre are long gone, but they were popular during their time.

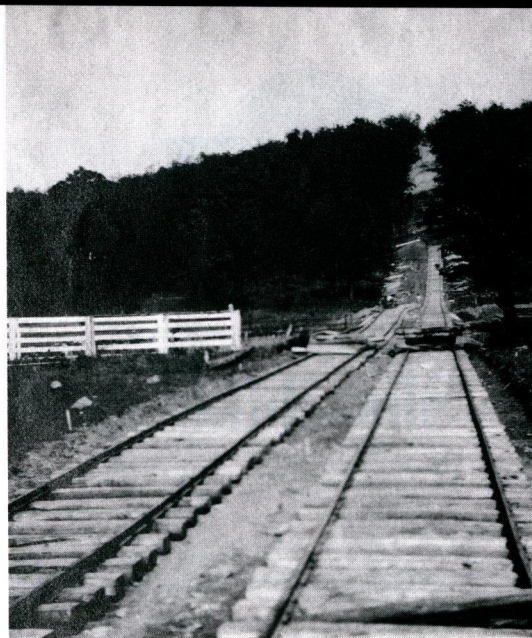
by Katelyn Quinley

One hundred years ago, the Magic City saw the addition of a few new icons. With a population of 34,874, new development was inevitable. Roanoke was now Virginia's third largest city, just behind Richmond and Norfolk.

The most noticeable new arrival was the incline rail on Mill Mountain, which opened on August 14th. Previously, a coach could make the long haul up the mountain in a lightning-fast three hours. Now, for a mere 25 cents, round-trip, passengers could find themselves at the summit in four minutes. Roanokers were thrilled with this novelty, as evidenced by the 1,500 people who rode the incline on opening day. But the incline's popularity did not last long. From 1910-1912, rides plummeted from 4,433 a month to 1,801.

The Mill Mountain Incline Company Inc.

knew that if the incline was to become the attraction they envisioned, they would have to lure people from other cities. So, the company renovated the dilapidated Rockledge Inn atop the mountain, built a new observatory to replace the old one from 1892 and published a promotional brochure. The following year a searchlight was installed, as well as a souvenir store which sold postcards from the print shop of the main advocate for the incline, Edward Stone. However, business did not pick up and the company soon found that the inn (which could accommodate only 12 guests) cost more to run than it earned and the paid admissions to the observatory declined by more than 16 percent over a two-year period. The company sold the \$40,000 rail for \$7,000 in 1919, and in 1929 when an automobile road was built up the mountain, it closed for good. Today, some claim the powerline strip on the mountain's face is the silhouette of the old rail.



The Roanoke Incline Railway opened on August 14, 2010, carrying about 1,500 people on its first day of operation.

If the incline wasn't sufficient amusement, Roanokers could view a short film and Vaudeville acts at the newly opened Jefferson Theatre. Located on the corner of Jefferson Steet and Luck Avenue, it was razed in 1977. Under the management of J. Schwartz, the theater held its first performance on Easter Monday. Every Friday after the first show, local talent competed for prizes of gold pieces at the theater's amateur night.

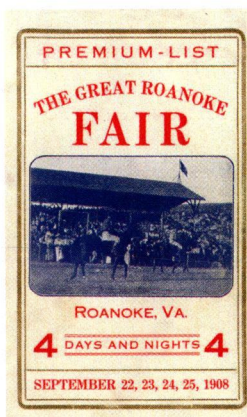
However, it is reported that Mayor Joel Cutchin detected so much immorality in the films that he suggested a female censor be appointed to view movies before they could be shown to the public. ☆

ENTERTAINMENT IN ROANOKE: 1910 V. 2010

Just what did Roanokers of the last century do for fun? Well, a lot of it isn't too far off from what we do today.

Things to do in 1910

- New York to Atlanta Endurance Run. Annual automobile race tour that stopped in Roanoke.
- The Great Roanoke Fair. Fun for the whole family was found at the fair, held annually during the early years of the 20th century. One night a week, children were admitted free of charge.
- The Jefferson Theatre. For a nickel, you could see a short silent movie averaging under 20 minutes.
- Mill Mtn. Incline. Billed as "100% safe" and "Roanoke's Greatest Attraction," it offered rides to the observatory at the top for a view of the city.
- Mountain Park. Located near Crystal Springs, it offered a casino, dance area, picnic pavilion and more!



The Great Roanoke Fair of 1910 was one of several in the early 1900s.

PHOTOS: COURTESY HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF WESTERN VIRGINIA

Things to do in 2010

- Star City Motor Madness. Every last Friday and Saturday in June, this event celebrates "America's passion for the automobile and the love of cruising."
- The Salem Fair. All the excitement of the average overcrowded local carnival with terrible food to boot ... what's not to love?
- Valley View Grande or the Grandin. For up to \$13 (and sometimes much less), see the latest 3D movie!
- Mill Mountain Star and Zoo. See the animals and look at the spectacular valley-wide view from the lookout, now with mountain-identification map.
- Elmwood Park—While it lacks a casino, this park has its own Eiffel Tower-like structure and is host to many events throughout the year, including Festival in the Park. -KQ