



SHS: PHOTO BY ROGER MUNNS

THE ROCKET THAT IGNITED UNION PARK

BY LORI VERMAAS

Many residents of Des Moines's northeastern neighborhoods call it a landmark. Children revere its uniqueness, a nine-year-old expertly once claiming that "it's not like any other around." Citizens champion its preservation. Towering 33 feet, the red-white-and-blue slide in Union Park certainly is unlike most historic structures.

The "rocket slide," as it is popularly known, is actually a sprawling, 92-foot-long playground climbing apparatus. It contains three slides: one linked to a spiral staircase coiled inside the main rocket structure; another that twists down from the caged hub of its 60-foot connecting ramp; and a small tunnel slide that shoots off a platform at the ramp's base. In 1992, about two decades after the rocket slide was installed in Union Park, the prospect of its removal ignited a firestorm of protest from the community. Indeed, the story of its repair and preservation confirms the rocket slide's value as a recreational and nostalgic object for Iowans of all ages. But its design and creation as playground equipment during the space

race of the 1960s adds to an even fuller understanding of the celebrated fixture.

In the late 1960s, the Miracle Equipment Company, owned by the Ahrens family of Grinnell, Iowa, and headquartered in the eastern Iowa town from 1927 to 1989, began selling space-age playground equipment during the height of America's frenzy and fascination over space technology. Christened "Astro City," the company's stellar product line of eleven different playground installations enthusiastically expressed the nation's faith in space-age engineering. One of the company's colorful, multi-page sales brochures, now archived in the State Historical Society of Iowa's collections, showcased a wondrously encompassing view of an idealized recreational landscape inhabited by astronautic-shaped objects, designs that responded to "the biggest challenge facing recreation today," according to its copywriter. Contending that Miracle's product line was helping to ready American "youth for the marvels of tomorrow's space age," the writer dared prospective



MIRACLE PLAYGROUND EQUIPMENT
FEATURED IN "ASTRO CITY"

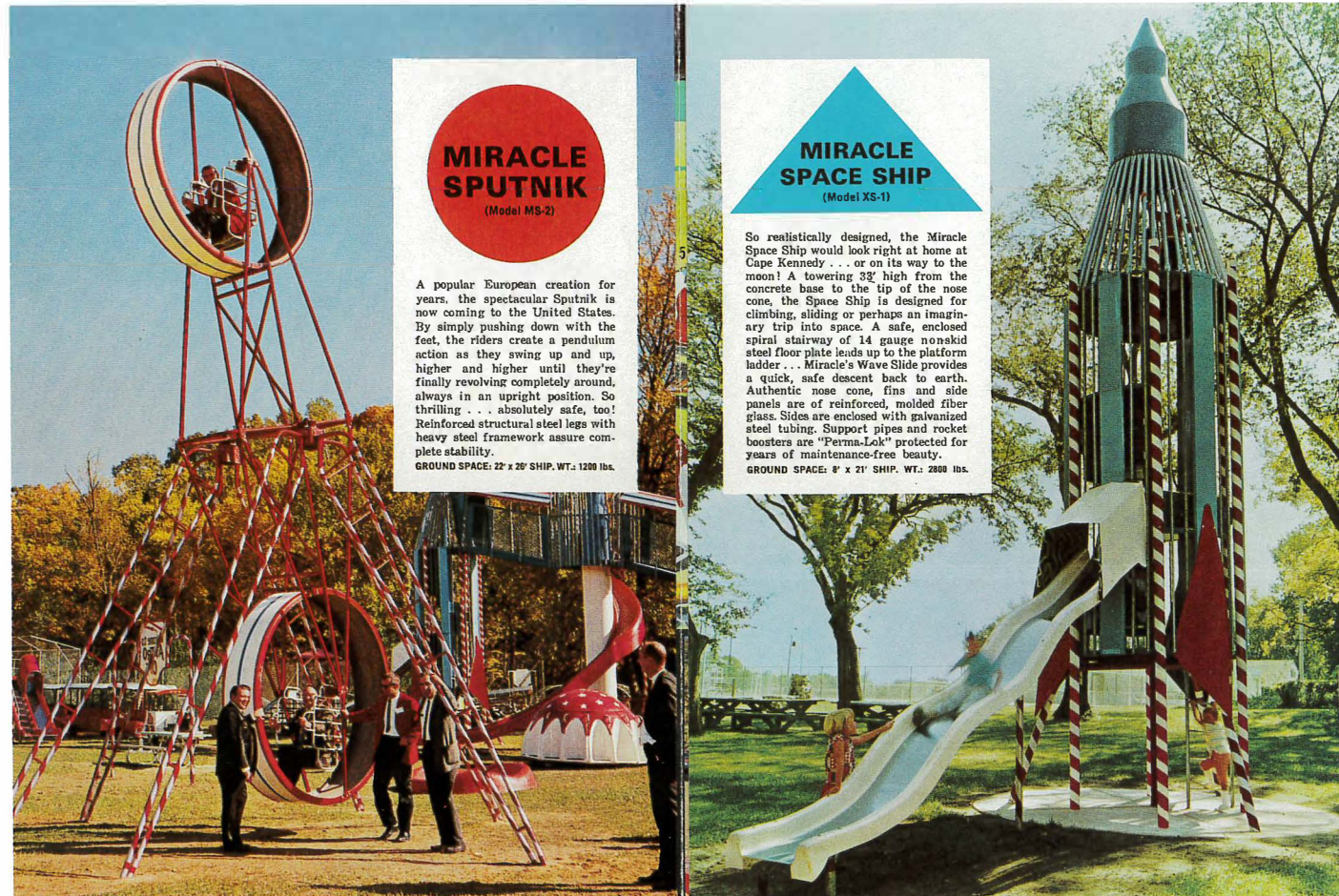
Key	Name	Model
1	SPACE SHIP	XS-1
2	AGENA TOWER AND UPPER RAMP	SS-6
3	V-2 LAUNCH PAD AND LOWER RAMP	V-2
4	V-1 LAUNCH STATION AND SWINGING FOOT BRIDGE	V-1
Overall Ground Space for Items 1 thru 4: 30' x 100'		
5	TELSTAR WHIRL	TS-306
6	SAUCER WHIRL	305
7	ASTRO WHIRL	304A
8	JET STAR SWING	60JS
9	JET STARS	JS-1
10	SPUTNIK	MS-2
11	SAND CRATER ENTRANCE SIGN	SB-1 CCP

This three-page fold-out from Miracle's advertising brochure lavishly illustrates the "Astro City" complex's other-worldly layout and atmosphere. Resting in a green moonscape orbited by Saturn, the space-age playground contains rides resembling those that might be found in an intergalactic carnival. The Miracle Space Ship, with its ramps, slides, and walkways fully extended, runs through the center, spanning nearly the entire playground. As the site's connecting element or star attraction, the sprawling apparatus unifies Miracle's colorful and astronautic-themed recreational environment.

customers to "meet that challenge [by using] the futuristic equipment featured in Astro City." Guided by such promotional intentions, Miracle's engineers crafted each component of "Astro City" to prepare children imaginatively for entry into the space age and its stunning promise of discovery and technological progress. There was Sputnik, a pendulum-based contraption dependent on momentum; riding it allowed children to "orbit the earth." The Astro, Saucer, and Telstar Whirl were UFO-shaped updates of the traditional merry-go-round that colorfully mimicked "a spin in space." Missile-shaped

jet stars and jet star swings afforded children the illusion of supersonic flight, while sand craters, actually miniature sand boxes, stimulated fantasies of moon walks. The Miracle Space Ship, finally, was the progenitor of Des Moines's Rocket Slide. A product of its time, Miracle's "Astro City" was one more way America's fascination with space-age technology found expression in 1960s popular culture—television programs like *Star Trek*, which debuted in 1966, and furnishings made of modern materials like fiberglass being other instances. While some of these fads and artifacts have vigorously

endured, many have disappeared or gone out of style. It is not known how many "Astro City" components Miracle installed in America's parks and playgrounds, but today's rocket slide at Union Park may be its only extant example. Yet it is a significant survivor, given a Des Moines neighborhood's steadfast protection of it nearly ten years ago. By the 1990s, Miracle had expanded into one of the world's oldest and largest manufacturers of park and play equipment. Early in 1992, the company recommended the rocket slide's removal because of a lack of replacement parts and liability concerns. Such a



The Sputnik and Space Ship were the most vibrantly interactive examples of Miracle's "Astro City" playground installations. Shrewdly linking them to the new engineering marvels produced by NASA, company brochure copywriters boasted that the Space Ship would be "right at home at Cape Kennedy" and that its Wave Slide provided "a quick, safe descent back to earth." Both the Sputnik's and Space Ship's steel framework and non-skid floors promised safe and stable entertainment, while their high-flying and towering designs thrillingly encouraged child's play—promotions of the optimism and excitement associated with space technology during the 1960s.

suggestion immediately antagonized residents, whose reactions sparked newspaper coverage. In an early April letter to the *Des Moines Register*, Wendy Overton, then a third-grader, anguished over its removal, maintaining that kids and adults from "all over" Des Moines flocked to the park just to play on the rocket slide. "It means a lot to . . . kids, parents and grandparents," she declared. Reasoning that because "buildings, pools, landmarks, houses get restored every day," she questioned why the Des Moines City Council couldn't "spend the money to restore our rocket slide." In another account, a father reminisced about his eagerness to play on the rocket slide while it was being installed some 20 years earlier, contending that he would now "be real mad if they tear that slide down."

Other residents soon joined the fight. Less than a week after hearing of the possibility of its destruction,

four children created the "Save the Rocket Slide for Kids Kommittee," while other neighborhood groups, particularly the North Park Jaycees and the Union Park Neighborhood Association, formed their own lobbying coalitions. The children's involvement included penny fundraising, petitioning for signatures, writing letters to newspaper editors, and attending city council meetings and other public hearings. The activism soon paid off. Nearly a month's worth of agitation encouraged the city council to devote \$2,500 toward the rocket slide's rehabilitation, and it inspired the Sheet Metal Workers' Local 45, among other volunteers, to donate the labor.

By early July, the rocket slide sported a fresh coat of paint, new metal mesh fencing along the walkway, and improved traction on its ramp and interior spiral staircase. Its resurrection prompted a grand opening



The powerful cover image of a United States rocket launch in one of the company's brochures showcases Miracle's vigorous enthusiasm for space technology's progressive influence.



The slide's deterioration (left) was clearly evident before city workers implemented this summer's improvements (right). The slide's new paint job, along with other repairs, has upgraded the Des Moines icon's appearance to one that more capably approximates the dynamic spirit of the product line promoted in Miracle's flagship brochure cover image (top).

ceremony three weeks later. Community activists, including one member of the Kids' Kommittee who showed up wearing a hardhat, helped to cut a 600-foot red ribbon connecting the rocket slide and other playground equipment.

Such affection continues for the "grand-daddy" of all city slides, as one newspaper reporter labeled it. Realizing that the rocket slide required still more safety improvements, the city council allocated \$75,000 for its repair and improvement last year, ultimately spending \$51,000 of it for repainting the structure, replacing many of its metal parts (some with fiberglass paneling), installing a curb, and providing a deep bed of sand within its perimeter to cushion any falls. Its removal not even a question this time around, the council and Parks Department regard its historic value as the main reason for its preservation.

Evidence of the 1960s excitement and optimism inspired by America's forays into space, the rocket slide today is more than just a local community landmark or paean to childhood. Part of a series of playground equipment that emerged in the late 1960s, the slide is a complex historic structure that not only expresses the nation's space-age ambitions but also reveals local Iowa park preservation history. Indeed, although its designers originally intended to enhance American children's preparation for a presumably grand, hi-tech future, the rocket slide's 30-year presence in Union Park has instead triggered in Iowans—of all generations—an assured appreciation for the past and its preservation. ❖

Lori Vermaas is an independent scholar and free-lance writer who specializes in American popular and visual culture. Currently a summer editorial intern with Iowa Heritage Illustrated, she continues to contribute articles and anticipates the publication of her dissertation, the first systematic study of the Giant Sequoias' visual culture from the Civil War to the World War II era.

NOTE ON SOURCES

For those interested in finding out more about historic playground equipment, unfortunately no study has been written, nor has anyone completed an inventory for those that remain in Iowa. The most promising sources to begin such an investigation probably are local newspapers—they are the proverbial haystack for locating this kind of information, but they usually have not been indexed. See the *Des Moines Register*, particularly for 1992 and June 2001, for the story of the rocket slide's preservation and restoration; and the Miracle Recreation Equipment Company's website, <www.miracle-recreation.com/site/frame.cfm?root=1207> for a brief description of the company's history. Thanks to Ralph Christian and Beth Foster of the Historic Preservation Bureau, State Historical Society of Iowa; Will Page, president of the Union Park Neighborhood Association; Lorna Caulkins, director, Stewart Library, Grinnell; Mark Boland, sales representative for Miracle Recreation Equipment Company; and Donald Tripp, director, Des Moines Parks and Recreation Department. Their generosity filled in some of the gaps and led me to other helpful contacts.