

**TALE  
OF THE  
SEVEN SEAS**

**CLINT SKINNER**

The tale of Arlington's first and only marine theme park began with its introduction in 1970 by the city's mayor, Tommy Joe Vandergriff. Originally, Seven Seas was going to be a large oceanarium in the same manner of the Living Seas Pavilion at EPCOT. However, plans quickly changed and the end product was the theme park design. The new initial plan for the forty-acre park was to have a cave for the entrance, complete with stalactites, stalagmites, and an underground waterfall. In addition, there would be a 200-seat seafood restaurant and club which would stay open throughout the entire year. The park itself would be divided into seven parts with a total of 26 exhibits. In one area, there would be a pirate ship in a man-made lagoon. Inside the ship, there would be educational displays for the public to enjoy. Every fifteen minutes, professionals would make dives and leaps from the highest point of the pirate ship. Another section would allow visitors to go on a sled ride down a fake ice slope. There would also be igloos to explore and an Alaskan trading post to shop.

A stadium for 1,200 people would host a show featuring 12 dolphins. Also on hand would be two killer whales in a tank filled with 700,00 gallons of water. Finally, a building structured like a pagoda would house a donut-shaped aquarium with a glass elevator to take people to the lower levels. The park would be able to handle a total capacity of 12,000 at one time. Like Six Flags, it would be open for 150 days and employ students for the vast majority of its job positions.

In April 1970, Tommy Joe Vandergriff placed the idea of Seven Seas into the public eye then proposed that the park be publicly financed by the city of Arlington. Critics immediately sprung up. They declared it wasn't the government's job to run amusement parks and had no right to use city funds in such a manner. Other proclaimed the government shouldn't get involved with the private sector. Vandergriff countered that it would bring in more tourist dollars, help the economy, and create more jobs. Vandergriff's plan was to sell ten million dollars worth of bond. Seven million would go to the creation of Seven Seas while the remaining three million would go to the purchase and renovation of Turnpike Stadium from Tarrant County in an effort to get the attention of Major League Baseball officials so he could finally realize his dream of bringing baseball to Arlington. In regard to Seven Seas, the Great Southwest Corporation had agreed to

lease and operate the park for thirty years, the amount of time it would take the city to fully pay of the bonds. The GSC had to pay Arlington twenty percent of gate admissions for the first five years, fifteen percent the next five years, and ten percent each year after that. This would guarantee a minimum of \$700,000 a year, more than enough to make the bond payments. This plan came before the city council on April 21, 1970 to vote on whether or not it would be presented to the people on the next ballot on May 12th. The measure was passed. The next few weeks included lots of lobbying and advertising. When voting day ended, the results were one-sided. Winning by a 3-1 margin, the number who voted Yes was 3,136 and the number who voted No was 1,018. With this victory, the road had been cleared for the construction of Seven Seas.

Construction began on July 8, 1970 with a special construction ceremony. Paintings of the pavilions and attractions were displayed for the city officials to see. Afterwards, two people approached the scene in a golf cart. Nance Floyd, a dancer at the Southern Palace show, posed as a mermaid. Sitting next to her was a dolphin trainer named Gail Brown. When they got to the site, Brown took the ceremonial shovel and removed the first bit of dirt to mark the beginning of construction.

The Great Southwest Corporation assured everyone there would be no problems whatsoever regarding the construction and operation of Seven Seas in accordance to the signed contract with the city of Arlington. The promise was short lived. In December, when the park was thirty percent complete, the GSC revealed. It could no longer continue construction because it could not obtain a performance bond of 6.5 million dollars. This problem was created because of the financial crisis created by Penn Central's sudden bankruptcy. The city council and the GSC got together to try and find a way for the corporation to obtain the bond. When no way was found, the council released the GSC from its contractual construction agreement. The Arlington council then unanimously passed a resolution allowing it to directly negotiate construction contracts with 50 subcontractors who would provide their own performance bonds. During this time, the GSC would act as the construction supervisor and make sure the project never went over budget.

On the evening of March 16, 1971, members of the Arlington City Council met with officials of the Great Southwest Corporation

concerning Seven Seas. After hours of talks, the two sides agreed to put an end to the entire contract once and for all. The city would take over control of the park's operation in addition to its construction. This action brought forth a wave of controversy. Since the contract had been terminated, how would the bonds be satisfactorily paid? Vandergriff repeatedly asserted that the move would actually allow Arlington to obtain more revenue now that it had complete control over the project. Yet, worries continued that the action would eventually lead to the city government dipping into more tax funds or force an increase in taxes. Leading the charge of this opposition was a 27-year-old UT student named Donald Praegar. Not only was he one of the leaders of the opposition, he was also Vandergriff's main rival in the mayoral race. On March 23, 1971, when Seven Seas was sixty-five percent done, Praegar announced plans to file an injunction suit to halt all construction and put an end to the project. The hearing took place at nine in the morning on April Fool's Day in the presence of Judge Harold Craik at the 153rd District Court. Praegar charged that the Vandergriff and the councilmen had broken state laws when they started conducting business with the subcontractors. They should have, in his opinion, sued the GSC for damages instead of paying the corporation for the work it had performed. Furthermore, the councilmen had used deception to misuse public funds when dealing with the contractors because the whole bond election had been based upon the premise that the city would be conducting business with the GSC in accordance to a contract, not a bunch of independent contractors.

Three days before the election, on April 3, 1971, Judge Craik made his decision. The city councilmen had used bad judgment but had not broken any laws. Thus, he would deny any court orders against Vandergriff and the councilmen. Part of the decision, he said, lay in the fact that if the construction was halted, it would cause irreparable damage to the city government which would be passed onto the tax payers. The battle may have been won, but the war was still to be decided. After all, there was still an election coming up to determine who would be mayor. If Vandergriff lost, the Seven Seas project would be dead in the water. Praegar continued pounding away at the incumbent with mudslinging attacks, condemning him for his obsession with the current theme park. When April 6th arrived, the citizens of Arlington spoke out. Tommy Joe Vandergriff would

continue his reign. And so, the Seven Seas project continued. Everything was going well for the Seven Seas project until May 28, 1971. SRO Asphalt was hired by Arlington to pave the parking lot and service roads, mainly because it made the lowest bid. Unfortunately, word got out that the company didn't have contracts with any of the labor groups. So all the other workers stopped what they were doing and started picketing. As the picketing dragged on, it soon became apparent there would be no way the park would open in August as planned. Instead, it would have to wait till 1972. This delay forced the city of Arlington to issue certificates of indebtedness, promissory notes representing a claim against future revenue, in order to cover expenses till the park opened. It also forced the city to prematurely hire vets to take care of the arriving wildlife. The picketing eventually ended and the construction continued. But the damage had been done.

On August 18, 1971, a christening ceremony was held for a full-scale replica of an eighteenth century vessel pirate ship called the Bona Venture. After the Navy Band from the Eleventh Naval District in San Diego played, the usual long speeches were made. Texas Governor Preston P. Smith had the honor of performing the christening. The city of Arlington held talent auditions for Seven Seas on November Sixth and Seventh, 1971. Hollis Pollard, General Manager of Arlington's Entertainment Division, oversaw the event at the Cibola Inn, located on Highway 80. The auditions were separated into two parts. The tryouts for the entertainment department took place on November Sixth. This area mainly covered entertainment which would be displayed for the public on land. The management was looking for talent in a vast range of areas including juggling, singing, dancing, announcing, gymnastics, musicians, and novelty acts. All participants were allowed three minutes to show their talent. They had bring they own materials with the exception of a piano, which was used for musical numbers. The tryouts for the aquatic department took place on November Seventh. This included diving and swimming for the various water shows such as synchronized swimming and diving stunts. Charles Meeker and Associates was responsible for designing the shows and training the audition winners.

On November 6, 1971, the Arlington City Council met to discuss what to do about its role in regards to Seven Seas and Turnpike Stadium. The result was the creation of the Arlington Park Corporation. Using Fair Park in Dallas as a successful precedent, the

city council announced it would turn over ownership of Seven Seas to a non-profit organization in an effort to make the project more efficient and profitable as well as free the members from the deep, involving responsibilities of running an amusement park and focus on other matters. Upon forming the Arlington Park Corporation, they appointed a group of directors who received the park's profits, negotiated contracts, and made the necessary decision making.

Seven Seas began hiring for the 1972 season on January Third. The personnel department interviewed thousands of high school and college student for the five hundred job positions available. The positions would be part-time during the spring and full-time during the summer. The jobs included the usual parking lot attendants, cashiers, concessionists, attraction supervisors, cleaners, and security, but also included animal and fish caretakers. Ordered chaos ensued and the personnel departments got their five hundred workers.

On January 28, 1972, officials made an announcement. Because it was owned by the city of Arlington, Seven Seas was allowed to sell beer and mixed drinks. This was done through its restaurant at the main entrance, which was called The Sea Cave. During the day hours, it would serve beer and wine. During the evening, it would also sell mixed drinks.

Newtka the Killer Whale was captured in Canada in 1970. Afterwards, it was sent to Los Angeles, where it stayed until Seven Seas was ready. Until then, the killer whale performed in shows. The moment to leave came in February. Surrounded by attendants, Newtka was covered with lanolin to prevent the skin from drying out. In addition, a portable pumps sprayed water on the whale as it lay in a hammock. Nearby, a 4-year-old elephant seal called Cisco was also on board for the Trip to Arlington. On February 8, 1972, Newtka arrived at Dallas Love Field and was transported to Seven Seas. Once there, the killer whale was trained by Jon Montgomery and Larry Smith.

The Arlington City Council originally predicted the park would open on April 1, 1972. However, the rapidity of construction, the successfulness of animal training, and the progress of entertainment programs prompted the council to change it to March Eighteenth.

The opening celebration started on a bright, sunny morning. Around nine o'clock, a parade started at the intersection of Sanford

and Collins then traveled along State Highway 157, Randol Mill Road, and Stadium Drive. It then marched past a review stand at the Seven Seas entrance. This parade included the UT of Arlington Band, three high school bands, three choirs, fire trucks, the Boy Scouts, a drill team, and a group of mounted police. After the parade ended, a few short speeches were made. Instead of using a ribbon for the traditional ribbon-cutting ceremony, a fish net was used. The park opened at 10:30 as scheduled. Two goldfish in a Seven Seas souvenir fish bowl were given to all kids on opening day as they left the park. The first season of Seven Seas had begun.

When Seven Seas first opened, tickets were \$3.75 for adults and \$2.75 for adults. Visitors got to explore the park's seven sections representing the Arctic Ocean, Mediterranean Sea, Caribbean Sea, Indian Ocean, Sea of Cortez, Sea of Japan, and South Sea. The park was thirty-five acres in size and cost nine million to build, two million over budget. The attendance goal for the first season was 850,000. It had over a hundred fish and sea animals. To accommodate them, the park had two filtering buildings and twenty-six pumps. The park was open from 10 to 6:30 on Saturdays and Sundays from March Eighteenth till June Third. Afterwards, it was open 9 to 7:30 daily till September Ninth.

On May 10, 1972, Seven Seas sent General Manager Hollis Pollard, Marine Biologist L. H. Kephart, and Public Relations Director Larry Todd on an Arctic expedition to capture some walrus for the park. They went to the Northern Alaska town of Gambell, where they met their guide Vernon K. Slwooko. After arriving at his house, Vernon gathered some local hunters and boarded skin boats to follow walrus herds in the Bering Sea. They managed to catch four babies and shipped them to Seattle, Washington where they stayed for a couple of days to allow them to get use to the temperate changes. They were then to flown to Arlington and sent to their new home at Seven Seas.

Officials at Seven Seas had good reason to be optimistic about the park's future. On July 5, 1972, the general manager revealed that the park had received more than 180,000 visitors from 41 states and 5 countries after only fifty days of operation, forty if the ten days it had to close due to bad weather were excluded.

In December 1970, seven Atlantic bottle-nosed dolphins were caught off the eastern coast of Florida near Fort Meyers Beach. The

average weight was three hundred pounds and the average length was seven feet. Three of them were named Tina, Archie, and Fiji. All seven were sent to Japanese Village and Deer Park in Los Angeles for special training. They each learned at least six tricks which included such tricks as retrieving objects and jumping on command. Also at the facilities for training were sea elephants and Humboldt penguins. Just as things were looking up, Beard Plumbing sued the city for \$170,282 at the 162<sup>nd</sup> District Court. The company, which had been subcontracted for the plumbing by the GSC, claimed it was owed \$52,784.61

for unpaid work and \$92,497.39 for equipment which was destroyed at the work site in addition to \$25,000 in lawyer fees. In the end, the matter was settled out of court.

When the Texas Rangers baseball team was created, the members soon found themselves without a club house at Turnpike Stadium. On October 24, 1972, six cranes lifted the 40-ton building onto a truck. It transferred the club house all the way to Seven Seas. The York Crane & Rigging Company then lifted it over a hill and settled it into its designated spot. All of this for a paint supply storage shed.

As the 1972 season for Seven Seas came to a close, the public started demanding the city government to release the park's financial records in regards to the expenses, costs, income, profit, and other monetary facts. After all, it was reasoned, Arlington's citizens were the ones who voted for the allowance of issuing bonds and certificates of indebtedness to pay for the park. Besides, as tax payers they had the right to have access to the information regarding government projects. Vandergriff dismissed the claims on November 16th, saying that the park would remain in debt until the end of 1973. Once a profit was obtained, all the financial specifics would be given to the public. Until then, everything would remain under wraps. This notion quickly disappeared five days later when he announced that the records would be released soon after the Thanksgiving holiday. The information was finally made public on December Thirteenth. It showed a net operating profit of over \$80,000 for Arlington Stadium and Seven Seas.

However, the government refused to give an individual breakdown, presumably because the two places shared employees and concessions. This profit was overshadowed by a loss of \$576,246 by the Texas Ranger Radio and Television Network which was also

owned by Arlington Park Corp., the non-profit company that ran Seven Seas for the city government.

The live show auditions for the 1973 season of The Seven Seas occurred on January Twentieth and Twenty-First. The man presiding over the auditions was the show producer, Bill Cole. He stressed that he wanted in swimmers, divers, singers, dancers, jugglers, and tumblers. However, he was far more interested in novelty acts which were

considered unique. All those interested in trying out for the entertainment auditions had to show at the Cibola Inn located in Arlington while those who wanted to swim and dive had to go to the swimming pool at the University of Texas at Arlington.

Bill Cole, the live show producer of Seven Seas, decided to make some changes to the entertainment aspects of the park for the 1973 season. The Underwater Theater would be changed and a sea lion act would be added to the show. Dancing dolphins would be added to the French River Show. At the Japanese Pavilion, sailors sang and danced during the day. Throughout the park, a gold-shirted band played maritime tunes.

In the Mediterranean section, a large water fountain and a replica of the Eiffel Tower was added. All the major pools were redecorated. Because the park would now stay open till dark, new lighting was installed. In addition to Key the Sea Lion performing at the Underwater Theater, the park acquired a sea turtle named Tom and a pair of seals named Diana and Island Baby. During the Saturday afternoon of opening day, ten sharks arrived from Key West, Florida as part of a permanent exhibit.

Seven Seas held its opening day for the 1973 season on March Seventeenth during the St. Patrick's Day weekend. Nothing spectacular happened in regards to the pre-opening celebrations which had been a trademark for Six Flags Over Texas. The gates opened around ten that morning. As the families rushed through the gates, the Seven Seas employees sang Before The Parade Passes By. The rest of the day remained uneventful.

During the 1973 season, Seven Seas was open ten to seven on Saturday and Sunday until June First. Afterwards, it would then operate ten to ten in the summer. Adults paid \$3.75 while kids paid \$2.75.

Children under 3 were free.

In early 1973 the Arlington Park Corporation, a non-profit organization created by the Arlington city council to run Seven Seas and Arlington Park, reorganized the Texas Rangers network in an effort to recoup from the previous year's losses. Arlington Park Corp. did this by discontinuing its radio-television network and creating a single outlet based in Dallas called KRLD at 1080AM. On the positive side, the corporation still had the ability to meet its required principal, interest, and reserve fund payments. However, this wasn't enough for Tommy Joe Vandergriff. According to the mayor, the corporation was unable to give any of its profits to the city, which was one the main reasons for the company's creation in the first place. So, on the Tuesday evening of March Twentieth, Vandergriff announced that Arlington Park Corp. would be eliminated and the city would gain control of the stadium and Seven Seas with re-emergence of the entertainment division of the city to be led by City Manager Charles Pollard. The company didn't argue with the matter because the takeover would allow it to have long-term financing of its \$23,000,000 debt.

To make the agreement a reality, Vandergriff introduced special legislation to allow the change to take place. He requested the legislation through Fort Worth State Representative David Finney and State Senator Betty Andujar. Passage of the bill was expected to take sixty to ninety days. The bill would allow the city of Arlington to purchase all the assets and assume the corporation's debt, creating a wave of fear that the government would be forced to raise taxes to pay for it, despite claims of the contrary from Vandergriff. Meanwhile, in order to finance the two attractions while waiting for the piece of legislation to become law, the Arlington Park Corporation requested the city to provide 2.5 million dollars in certificates of indebtedness. On March 27th, the cit council approved the corporation's request.

On July 9th, the Arlington Council voted to issue \$8,450,000 in revenue and general obligation certificates of indebtedness to buy the Arlington Park Corporation in preparation for the passage of the bill. The piece of legislation finally passed the following day, giving Arlington complete control of Arlington Stadium and Seven Seas. Once again, the park found itself in the hands of the city government. Two months after the city government regained its control of Seven Seas, it received terrible news. Seven Seas reported on September

Eighth that it had suffered an actual decrease in attendance. The 1973 season brought in 422,464 , a deficit of 48,347 from the year before.

Looking at the figures, the government blamed the failure to attract more people on the bad weather the park experienced during the first ten weeks of its operation. To make matters worse, the city ended up having to pay two million dollars in bonds and interest spent on its entertainment and pay an additional two million dollars in salaries. On top of all this, seven park officials quit their jobs, including PR Director Larry Todd, who transferred to the Highway Users Federation as the Texas regional representative and public relations and information director.

With the mounting negative news about the park's performance and other surrounding events, the public started pressuring Vandergriff and other government officials to hand over control to an outside company. Along with the pressure came rumors that city council was doing exactly that. One such rumor surfaced when a special visit occurred.

On December Fourth, George Millay, the president of Sea World, made a trip to Seven Seas while it was closed. Vandergriff claimed that Millay had visited the park to get ideas for an underwater show which would be a new addition to the California attraction. He also asserted there had been no contact whatsoever about the possibility of Sea World taking over Seven Seas. Yet, the rumor persisted until it eventually fizzled out.

Seven Seas suffered significant losses for the 1973 season. The entertainment division of the Arlington city government reported an overall loss of \$722,842. The Texas Ranger Baseball Network accounted for \$292,549 of the red ink while Seven Seas accounted for more than seventy-five percent of the losses with a debt of \$549,902. To make matters worse, these figures didn't include the 1973 interest payment for the bond debt of \$453,000.

On the evening of January 9, 1974, an announcement made by Tommy Joe Vandergriff proved that the rumors had been true. The mayor was indeed negotiating with Sea World officials to have the San Diego park take ownership of Seven Seas. He predicted a deal would be agreed upon within two weeks. At the present moment, city officials were working on the lease's details. Although he was working on a short-term agreement, Vandergriff hoped a long-term agreement for twenty years could be reached. Two weeks passed and Vandergriff

grew impatient. Claiming that a proposal had to be send to the city council immediately, he turned elsewhere.

After abandoning Sea World, Vandergriff started negotiations with Six Flags Inc. On January 29, 1974, the city council met with President Ned P. Witt II and Vice-President Robert W. Freeman at Arlington City Hall to discuss the lease contract. Formal approval was given after only thirty minutes of discussions. According to the lease agreement, Six Flags would manage and operate Seven Seas for four years. For compensation, Six Flags would receive \$350,000 or thirty-five percent of the net profits, whichever was greater. The city, in turn, would receive a rental payment \$700,000 or sixty-five percent of the net profits, whichever was greater. At the end of the four years, Six Flags would have the option to lease Seven Seas for another three years.

As a result of Six Flags Inc. taking the reigns of Seven Seas, many of the personnel were either moved or terminated. In charge of the task was City Manager Ross Calhoun. A large majority of those already working at the park would be spared. Hollis Pollard, the general manager of the park's entertainment department, was transferred to help with Arlington Stadium. The maintenance labor foreman was also transferred to the stadium while the water curator was moved to the city's water distribution department. A group sales manager and his assistant, a wardrobe assistant and her assistant, a nurse and a finance auditor became the first to be terminated from their jobs. Jim Ashworth was appointed to be the general manager of Seven Seas. He started working for Six Flags in 1964 as the director of planning and as an assistant to the general manager. Sue Moore, who had served as the director of advertising at Six Flags, became the director of marketing. Frank Thompson became the director of operations. Jack Eastwood was the controller of Arlington's entertainment division before he was named the director of finance. Previously the manager of gifts and souvenirs at Six Flags, Mike Hinshaw became the director of merchandising. Paul Cordes, a man heavily involved with the Six Flags training program, became the director of maintenance.

Seven Seas started its 1974 season on Friday, May Third. The opening ceremony started at five o'clock with a speech by the general manager Jim Ashworth. He then introduced various members of the Seven Seas management team followed by Tommy Joe Vandergriff.

After the mayor gave a short speech, a recorded version of the song Hello Dolly played from loud speakers while employees released enormous clusters of balloons into the air. As a highlight of the evening, a country singer named Donna Fargo performed a concert.

The 1974 season started on May Third and continued until November. It was open from ten to six only during the weekends until May Twenty-fifth. After that time, the park would be open daily until August Twenty-fifth. From that point onward, the park would only stay open Saturday and Sunday. The prices for the 1974 season remained the same for Seven Seas. Adults paid \$3.75 for admission, children spent \$2.75, and kids under three got free passage.

When Seven Seas opened in 1974, a character named Captain Jonah Wayne was added to the park. He was joined by an elephant seal named Pancho and three dolphins called Jeannie, Rodney, and Debbie. Monkeys and a group of penguins were also present at the park.

For the 1974 season, everything got a paint job, including the lighthouse which was given a green-and-white checkered pattern. In addition to The Seabottom Symphony, a gymnastic show was added next to the diving stunt area with trampolines placed in the water next to the Bona Venture sailing ship. Visitors could also view the ship while eating at a newly-built, sit-down restaurant. Management also added a vast array of Midway carnival games to the park.

The Seabottom Symphony was the world's first underwater puppet show. It took place inside a tank which was 70 feet deep. The audience watched the show along the tanks perimeter. The show featured a hundred puppets, including pink hippos, mermaids, and furry creatures called nards. The puppets were operated by invisible rods and scuba divers. Working at the bottom of the tank underneath the stage, the divers handled the mechanics of the show.

Seven Seas experienced a number of music star visits during the 1974 season. Donna Fargo performed on during the park's opening day on May Third. On May Tenth, a five-member group called The Grass Roots gave two free concerts at eight and ten that night at the Seas of Cortez Amphitheater, allowing the park to stay open till midnight. The group had been playing since 1966 and had sold over ten million records by the time they played at Seven Seas. Their hits included such songs as Sooner Or Later, Wait A Million Years, Let's Live For Today, Temptation Eyes, and Two Divided By Love. A

week later on May Seventeenth, the Statler Brothers made an appearance with the same performance times. The quartet became well-known for the songs Flowers On The Wall and Class of '57. Roger Williams played for audiences on May Twenty-fourth. On September Sixth, Seven Seas hosted concerts featuring country and western music stars Patsy Sledd, Harold Morisson, George Jones and Tammy Wynette. There were concerts that night at the Sea Lion Theater. The first one started at seven and the other at ten. The park remained open till midnight and both concerts were free.

Seven Seas received excellent positive news in June 1974. The park was actually breaking attendance records. The previous May only brought 22,500 visitors. For May 1974, attendance surpassed the 60,000 mark. Adding to the good news, Arlington Stadium had attracted more than 400,000 baseball fans. Vandergriff expressed optimism for the parks and all seemed well. Unfortunately, the bottom would soon fall out.

Four months after the wonderful news on attendance figures, the Arlington City Council held a special executive meeting behind closed doors to determine the future of Seven Seas. Although the park had acquired a profit large enough to cover operational costs, Six Flags President Ned DeWitt proclaimed it was a successful season for Seven Seas, the profit was nowhere near the amount needed to pay off the annual payment of the refinanced debt of \$34,000,000 the city had inherited when it had bought Seven Seas from the Arlington Park Corporation. That fateful Tuesday night on October 1, 1974, the council voted unanimously to close the gates of Seven Seas forever. The payment due at the end of the year would be paid using the city tax funds. City Manager Ross Calhoun was instructed to make a deal with Six Flags to lease the property which would allow management to expand Six Flags and possibly add a new section. All of the equipment, supplies, and animals would be sold. All the money would be used to help pay off the bonds. The animals would be auctioned in competitively bids. Overall, the council hoped to get rid of the Seven Seas property and animals by February 1975.

When the Arlington City Council made its decision on closing Seven Seas known to the public, Tommy Joe Vandergriff blamed the park's failure on the construction delays, high operating costs during the off-season, and decreased tourism caused by the nation's inflation, gasoline shortages, and rising fuel costs. The media also pointed many



faults. The park relied too much on eye candy, something which was in more abundant supply at Six Flags. Furthermore, residents couldn't afford going to both Six Flags and Seven Seas, so they often chose the well-known theme park. It also didn't help when there was another animal park in the vicinity called Lion Country Safari. It was also pointed out that the park's compactness prevented many of the visitors from seeing its shows and attractions.

The fallout over the Seven Seas closure began in late September. The Arlington Committee For Fair Taxation, a group comprised of citizens living in South Arlington, asked State Attorney General John Hill to force the city to reveal the park's financial records under the Open Records Law after the council had refused to do so during budget hearings. The groups believed that the information was vital because it had such a negative effect on the budget. They also requested an opinion on whether or not the 1974-1975 budget was legal because of the way it was filed. The group also vowed to create a line of candidates to oppose the city council members running for reelection in 1975, including Mayor Vandergriff.

Despite accusations of political motivations against the Arlington Committee For Fair Taxation, John Hill took the matter to District Judge Charles Murray. The judge originally set the hearing on the matter to take place on January 9, 1975. However, at the request of the committee, the hearing day was moved a few weeks earlier to December 20th. The main argument for this date change was that the citizens should know the park's financial status in case it was reopened by another company with a new theme.

Hoping to beat the Committee to the buzzer, Vandergriff released a report summary on December Ninth at a press conference with four other council members, fifty high school students, and members of the Committee in attendance. According to the 22-page report, the Arlington entertainment division lost a total of 8.5 million dollars during the first three years. Seven Seas accounted for 5.3 million of it. It also stated that the city would have to pay back the forty million dollars in bonds it sold to buy Arlington Stadium and the Seven Seas. Finance Director Keith Reed expressed hopes that all the money from the sale of the park and its inhabitants would take care of the bond retirement. The Arlington city council predicted that the furor over the closing of the park would decrease once the full financial report was disclosed. Instead, it drastically increased with tales of corruption,

incompetence, and cover-ups. Conspiracy theories abounded.

Ex-employees claimed that the park would have been successful if it weren't for the inexperienced management bungling things as it went along its merry way. They also said that they were afraid to make any complaints about the goings-on at Seven Seas because they worried that they would simply be considered a snitch or being anti-Arlington. So they either kept their mouths shut or moved out of the city. According to many workers, the supervisors allowed the live show department to auction off the vast majority of the props and equipment so that there could be a large end-of-summer party. The city then ended up having to replace everything. They also asserted it wasn't just one big rip-off that caused so much trouble; there were little ones as well. Adding to the mix was the costly problem of replacing and retraining animals which had died, some of them caused by the improper maintenance of the salt water.

The ex-employees focused on another area. During the early years, management hired inexperienced amateurs into areas which required expertise. When problems arose as a result, employees were told to keep quiet about it. Because the park was being run by the city, managers were encouraged to hire native citizens first, even if it meant rejecting more qualified candidates from out of town. There was even a card file with the names of teenagers belonging to prominent members of the community and civil government who were looking for a job. Unfortunately, many of the hires which were politically motivated were also incompetent and didn't know how to their job correctly. Things just kept getting worse.

The public started bringing up suspicions that something funny was going on. It wondered how a ten-million-dollar investment, which included Arlington Stadium and its related ventures, could explode into a forty-one million investment. This feeling of cover-up was further fueled by the fact that much of the spending details were murky at best. Suspicions of payoffs and wasting money arose. Many fingers pointed to the doughnut-shaped aquarium concept, supposed to be one of the main attractions, which was abandoned in favor of a restaurant due to its expensiveness, despite the fact that the city had a budget of seven million, which increased to 13.5 million by the time the park had opened. Also on the missing list were manatees, penguins on skates, and a second killer whale. In regards to Arlington Stadium, its

cost was only supposed to be three million but ballooned to 18.5 million. Meanwhile, the newly Shafer Stadium housing the Boston Patriots at Foxboro, Massachusetts only cost the city 6.2 million. It had sixty-two thousand seats compared to Arlington's thirty-five thousand. And so the people were wondering what caused the huge escalation in construction costs.

The public's suspicion and frustration was risen further by the actions of management officials. In 1971, the city council authorized use of 2,275,000 dollars worth of bonds to make stadium improvements meant for Seven Seas because Vandergriff said the money wasn't needed for the park. Yet, the money was shown in the expense column under Seven Seas. Keith Reed, Arlington's financial director recalled the money was used for the parking lots but knew nothing about whether or not it was needed by the park. One person recalled that the accounting was a complete disaster and that it was next to impossible to determine what belonged where. Seven Seas money would sometimes be used for Arlington Stadium or Texas Ranger Network while workers belonging to the city water and street maintenance departments found themselves doing chores related to the entertainment department. The end result was a situation where it was impossible to discover the amount spent on Seven Seas and the amount which wasn't.

There were also stories of special kickbacks and hidden costs, one of them including Hollis Pollard, the head of the entertainment division, receiving fifty bucks for every 1972 home game in addition to his \$30,000 salary. Associates working with Gary D. Rollins, the vicepresident of the Texas Rangers Broadcast Network, said that he failed to make any sponsorship deals and wasted tax payer dollars traveling to far away places that weren't in the Ranger broadcast area. Despite his inability to obtain any concrete contracts, he lied about it to the bankers involved in a loan agreement of 7.5 million dollars which the city used to buy Ranger broadcasting rights. When they discovered the truth, the bankers removed themselves from the deal. The city ended up paying the costs when it acquired the Arlington Park Corporation. On top of all the conspiracy theories, even more bad news arrived at the steps of Arlington City Hall.

On December 21, 1974, the city council held bidding for the Seven Seas wildlife. Busch Gardens, Sea World, the Hamia Seaquarium, Sealand, and Joe Evidge were the primary bidders.

Busch Gardens wanted a pair of otters, two Himalayan black bears, twenty-one American parrots, and two toucans. Joe Evidge wanted a chimpanzee, parrots, bears, and some of the pigeons and doves. There were also two gators, twelve pea fowl, two Polish chickens, sharks, ducks, hens, and a killer whale. The bids were disappointingly low. Newtka was expected to sell for at least \$100,000 but the final bid was \$42,682 by

Newtka's original owner, Sealand of Pacific. It was located in Vancouver, Canada. The remainder of the animals received bids totaling \$70,352. The sharks, gators, hens, peas fowl, and hens didn't attract a single bidder. The city council considered the bids so low that they called a special meeting to consider whether or not to accept them. Feeling that bids were low because the people thought the city was desperate to get rid of the animals, the council ultimately decided to reject the bids and privately negotiate prices.

On January 15, 1975, Vandergriff announced that Six Flags would not lease the Seven Seas property to expand its park with a new section. The park officials revealed in a letter to the mayor that it wasn't economically feasible to construct another section at the time. Vandergriff, in a moment of optimism, stated that he would try to negotiate with three other companies about accepting the lease. He also made assurances the new park would maintain the sea life theme. As part of the agreement made during the previous year, the city would not share in any of the operating cost because it was no longer considered to be a city operation. Instead, the city would only receive money from the lease of the property.

After Six Flags rejected Vandergriff's leasing offer, the mayor looked to other interested companies. The first was Marine Animal Producer, Incorporated. Another contender for the park was an odd bid. It came from the Dr. Pepper Company. The two bids were rejected in favor of a joint venture by Leisure Marine Corp and ABC. Leisure Marine was a company based in San Diego and owned by George D. Millay, the founder of Sea World. Together, they would run Seven Seas, hoping their collective experience in the entertainment industry would be enough to make the park profitable.

According to the contract, the city would receive one percent of the gross income for the first five years. Afterwards, it would receive two percent or 100,000 dollars, whichever was greater, for the next 45 years. In addition, the two companies would purchase the animals for

a grand total of \$125,000. Vandergriff admitted the agreement would not entirely pay for the city's park debt, but asserted that the success of Arlington Stadium would pay the remaining amount. On March 4, 1975, the lease was signed and Seven Seas was given a second chance.

The new executives responsible for running Seven Seas in 1975 were George D. Millay, Fred Brooks, and John E. Shawen. George D. Millay was the founder of Sea World and would serve as the chief operating officer. Fred Brooks, the special projects manager at Disneyland, was the director of operations. John E. Shawen previously served as Circus World's director of finance and would continue that position at Seven Seas.

When the two companies took the reins of Seven Seas, one of the first things they did was repainting the entire park to make it look brand-new. They also decided to overhaul the marketing department. In addition to using television and radio ads, they also focused on future promotions such as giving away free t-shirts and Frisbees. They sought to improve the souvenir department. However, they stressed the importance of word of mouth and told the press that sixty percent of their advertising would rely upon it. For entertainment, they added human cannonball, acrobats doing stunts on swinging poles, high wire performers, and water choreography performed by women dressed as mermaids. They also changed the regular animal acts to reflect a more professional touch.

Cosell the Snapping Turtle, named after the famous sports announcer Howard Cosell, was one of the attractions that year along with Buster the Bear. Trained by John Carlyle, he once managed to slip out of his collar during a training session and escaped up a tall tree. John followed Buster and tried in vain to get him down. An hour later, Buster came down of his own accord. At the Japanese Pavilion, two women dived for pearls to give to the spectators. Every hour, they dove to the bottom of the eight-foot pool and returned to the surface with an oyster. They were dressed with a pale white garment that covered the entire body. It was primarily used by the Japanese to help protect the wearers from shark attack. During the 1975 season, the pearl divers were Kay Muir and Ester Lee. Kay Muir came from Tokyo, Japan. Her mother moved the United States in order to have a career working as a culinary director. Kay lived with Ester Lee, who came from Hong Kong and was currently pursuing a master's degree

in computer science. They would be the final pearl divers of Seven Seas.

In the years to come, management planned to make Seven Seas more interactive by including rides, body slides, and games. The park would follow the theme of "Wet and Wild". Even with this future vision, the owners noted it would probably take at least three years for the park to be more profitable. On July 26, 1975, out of the blue, John Shawen announced that ABC and Leisure Marine Inc. would work together to create a new kind of park because of the economic woes caused by the cost of caring for the animals, training the animals, and competing with Six Flags. They would construct a water park featuring large pools, wave machines, water rides, diving shows, surfing, and water slides. The new theme of the park would be "wet and wild".

As a result of these changes, they planned to sell all the animals by September 1st. When Seven Seas closed for the season, they would then install the new theme.

When Seven Seas closed for its final season, the seven sea lions were shipped to a buyer in Switzerland. Three sea lions found new homes at the Houston Zoological Society. The Sea Arama, located in Galveston, received two trained sea lions, three harbor seals, and two black bears. A Chicago company which provided animal shows for parks got its hands on the four performing dolphins. The female chimpanzee was sold to a San Francisco chimp show. Newtka the Killer Whale went to the Marineland and Game Farm in Niagra Falls, Canada where she was joined with another killer whale named Candu. The future of the flamingos, ducks, geese, Japanese carp, six sea lions, and an elephant seal remained uncertain.

On September 2, 1975, after getting rid of all the animals, ABC and Leisure Marine Corp. refused to renew its lease. They claimed that the lease payment was too expensive for them. Instead of renewing it, they decided to try and negotiate a new lease which would be more suitable for them. When this news reached the media, Vandergriff assured the public that the park would open sometime the following year near Memorial Day under new management. In fact, he claimed, he was already meeting with companies who were interested in taking the joint venture's place.

Vandergriff was telling the truth. There were other companies interested in making a deal. One of them reached an agreement and

built Hawaii Kai. On October 15, 1975, the Arlington city council approved a lease which would place Seven Seas into the hands of J & L Enterprises. Located in Biloxi, Mississippi, the company was operated by President Donald P. Jacobs. Under the contract, J & L Enterprises would pay an annual rent of \$50,000 with a 45-year option and periodic five-year sub-options. The annual rent would gradually increase to \$100,000 or two percent of the gross income, whichever was greater, after ten years. The city wouldn't spend any money on the park, including the remodeling necessary to change the theme. For Donald Jacobs envisioned a park which would make its visitors feel as though they were on a Hawaiian island.

When Don Jacobs announced his plans for Hawaii Kai, it was met with ardent skepticism. The opponents pointed to the long history of bad luck. Even those who wished the company well thought it wouldn't last long. Despite the negative response, Jacobs remained optimistic. In his eyes, Seven Seas had failed because it was all show and no interaction. His park would be different, involving the guests at every turn. He also pointed out that the previous owners didn't leave because of it wasn't profitable, but because they couldn't afford making the necessary remodeling needed for their new vision of the park. In addition, he had located a solution to the salt water problem which had plagued the previous owners. The water systems would be changed to handle fresh water which could take care of the animals during the off-season.

The changes made for Hawaii Kai were cosmetic at best. It mainly consisted of painting the buildings brown and tan. The fact of the matter was the company didn't have the time to do much construction work in order to be ready for opening day. As noted earlier, the park used a completely different water system. Because of an agreement between Arlington and Six Flags, the new owners couldn't build any rides in the park. The most unique change involved the employees. All the workers at the park came from Hawaii. Forty teenagers from the island were flown overseas to Arlington to serve at the park

. Hawaii Kai opened on its doors Friday morning at ten o'clock on June 4, 1976. Unlike the previous opening days, there was little fanfare and the park received lackluster coverage by the media. Hawaii Kai was open daily from ten to six at first, then it changed the closing time to 8:30. It remained operating on a daily basis until Labor

Day. Afterwards, it stayed open during the weekend until September Twenty-Sixth. Adults had to pay \$5.00, kids had to spend \$3.50, and children under three were free. In addition to these admission prices, a person could buy a season pass for twelve dollars. The attractions at Hawaii Kai included water shows, multi-media presentations, performing dolphins, diving shows, performing sea lions, Polynesian dancers, talent shows conducted by the employees, and the chance to feed, ducks, dolphin, and deer.

Donald P. Jacobs brought thirty-five teenagers to work at Hawaii Kai. They all studied at the Kamehameha School of Honolulu and were members of the Kai Troupe. The school placed a strong emphasis on preserving the Hawaiian culture with a special focus on the traditional songs and dances. Composed of sixteen girls and nineteen boys, they were hand-picked by Charlene Hoopii, who was a friend and former employee of Jacobs. When choosing the students, she looked for musical talent, personality, and academic achievement. Donald Jacobs paid for the students' plane tickets to Dallas along with their room, board, and paychecks. They stayed in two-person apartments at Bauder College. Jacobs made it clear that if there were any problems during their stay, they could call him and the situation would be taken care of.

All thirty-five students performed a 45-minute show of traditional songs and dances four times a day. The choreographer for the show was Matthew Souza. The native costumes the troupe wore were handmade by the girls. Lester Cabral, who played the part of King Kamameha, wore royal garments. After the park closed, the troupe usually stayed around instead of heading toward the apartments, eating dinner made for them by the park's cook everyone called Pop. Afterwards, they either played volleyball or sang while someone played the guitar. Although several of them planned to go home when the season was over, some would stay in Texas. Paid for by Donald Jacobs, Charlene Hoopii and Lourdes Estores would have scholarships to attend Texas Christian University. Edward Simeona and Matthew Souza would get scholarships to go to the University of Texas At Arlington.

On July Tenth, Hawaii Kai reported disappointing attendance for June. The 48,000 visitors was eighteen percent short of the projected expectation. Nevertheless, Don Jacobs remained optimistic. On August Twenty-Seventh, Hawaii Kai introduced luaus to its park.

They would take place every Friday and Saturday night at 8:30. It included a Polynesian buffet, a stage show, and special visiting privileges throughout the day. Admission to the luau was \$12.50 per person.

On September 11th, 1976, news reached the media that J & L Enterprises had filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. Don Jacobs said it was filed because the company suffered from horrendous financial losses created by lackluster attendance at Hawaii Kai. Once the bankruptcy was publicly declared, the park closed its doors permanently. The bankruptcy was the final straw for the Arlington City Council. After five ownership failures, it was time to give up. The council voted unanimously on December Eighteenth to put an end to its entertainment endeavors with the exception of Arlington Stadium. As a final nail in the coffin, Tommy Joe Vandergriff, the man who made Seven Seas a reality, resigned his post as mayor eleven months later on November 21, 1977. The tale of Seven Seas was over.