

# Famous New Yorker Lina Beecher

Lina Beecher's career was a roller-coaster ride of ups and downs, so it's only fitting that this tireless inventor and entrepreneur is best remembered for a roller coaster that was ahead of its time.

Beecher was born on Jan. 2, 1841, in Byron, Genesee County. During the Civil War he became a captain in the U.S. Cavalry. After the war, he commanded a militia company, the Pitts Light Guards, in Orleans County. Beecher raised a family with his wife Margaret and held several jobs: printer, auctioneer, theater manager and deputy sheriff.

Beecher's life changed in the 1880s. His militia company was effectively disbanded in 1882, and Margaret died in 1883. Lina responded with a burst of creativity and risk-taking extending from coast to coast.

Fascinated by the recently invented telephone, Beecher developed a portable telephone for military use. He got into the railroad business, building the Genesis & Obed River Railroad in Tennessee. He planned a telephone line along the same route, but the venture failed when heavy snow broke his lines.

Railroads inspired Beecher's greatest creativity, and he was most interested in minimizing the risk of trains derailing. He knew that centrifugal force would allow a vehicle moving at sufficient speed to run in a vertical loop without falling off the tracks. To demonstrate this, he designed the Flip Flap Railway, the first loop coaster in the United States and the first anywhere since the French tried one in 1848.

Beecher believed that a single-rail track – known as a “bicycle rail” or “monorail” – would make train travel safer. While conventional trains ran on two rails, with wheels on either side, an electrically powered monorail train would run on a single rail, with additional wheels underneath serving as guides to keep it on the track. Such a train could take sharp turns with less chance of derailing.

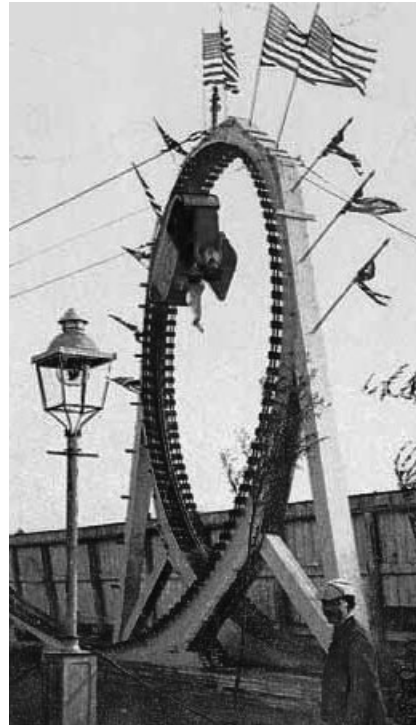
While Beecher's ideas would be developed successfully by others decades later, Beecher himself had little lasting success. The Flip Flap coaster was built in Toledo and eventually moved to Coney Island, but its tight circular loop put intense G-force pressure on passengers. People who dared ride it sometimes suffered whiplash or blacked out from the strain. Beecher learned from other designers that an elliptical track made the trip easier, but his later loop coasters never caught on. In fact, one of them was barred from the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo because organizers considered it unsafe.

Beecher's monorail projects were more promising. Tests conducted at Waterport, where Beecher started an electric power company, impressed early observers and received a lot of publicity. Unfortunately, his project never developed beyond a short track between Waterport and Lakeside. Years later, he designed a “flangeless railway” in Miami, Florida. Again there was early enthusiasm, but the project was never completed.

As his more ambitious projects fizzled, Beecher started other businesses, from bottling the waters of Horseshoe Lake to mattress manufacturing in Florida and gold mining in Washington. In old age, he lived with his daughter in Lapeer, Michigan, where he died on Oct. 5, 1915. As time went by, it mattered less whether Lina Beecher had made a lot of money. It mattered more that he had made history.

To learn more, visit “A Century of Screams: The History of the Roller Coaster,” a website from PBS and WMHT at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/coney/sfeature/history.html>. This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA Newspaper In Education Program. All rights reserved 2016.

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Vintage Postcard image of the Flip Flap Railroad c. 1895



Byron is a town in Genesee County, west of Rochester and about 16 miles northeast of Batavia.