

Merry-Go-Roundup

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The Carousel of Smiles: A New Journey for a Forgotten Carousel

Clay Hutchison

Ever since her first ride at Columbia Gardens in Butte, Montana, Reno Hutchison has had a lifelong love of carousels. "I've never seen anything else that creates the feeling that a carousel can. The instant smiles, the sparkle it creates in kids young and old alike, the exuberance—it is something so special, so unique."

Butte was not a particularly nice place to grow up, and the gardens were a special place to Reno and all of Butte's kids and adults alike. "The pavilions, the gardens, the rides and especially the carousel—we looked forward to our outings there. They were the highlight of our summers," recalls Reno.

A fire in November 1973 destroyed the beautiful pavilions along with the much-loved Allan Herschell carousel that was stored inside.

This tragedy sparked a desire in Reno to find and restore an abandoned "Golden Age" carousel and bring it to her hometown of Sandpoint, Idaho (it also sparked the "Spirit of Columbia Gardens Carousel," a 20-plus-year project "to bring Butte people and civic resources together to construct and operate a hand carved carousel, reminiscent of the beloved Gardens"—ButteCarousel.com).

Reno's passion for carousels never waned and, as my wife, she drew me in (we met in Sandpoint in the late 1990s). We would stop and ride every carousel we came upon—the Looft in Spokane, Washington, the "Carousel for Missoula" in Montana, even revisiting the Stein & Goldstein in New York City's Central Park, which I hadn't ridden since I was a kid. Reno's passion was infectious, and it wasn't long before we both started dreaming about

See the Spring 2001 Merry-Go-Roundup for more on Columbia Gardens.



Columbia Gardens,
Butte, Montana
(note rounding
boards of Allan
Herschell carousel).

—Hutchison Collection



**Kansas State Fair,
Hutchinson,
Kansas, 1952
(Allan Herschell
carousel at center).**

—*Carnival Heritage
Center, Kinsley, Kansas*

finding an old carousel abandoned in some farmer's barn, just waiting to be discovered and restored.

However, our efforts to find a carousel were not encouraging. In the carousel world, there was little expectation that any "unknown" were left to be rediscovered, and one appearing at auction would need to meet or surpass the per-piece auction value—a daunting proposition. NCA President Bette Largent (curator of Spokane's Riverfront Park Looff) writes, "It is rare to discover a carousel preserved with its original components and artwork—it just doesn't happen every day. Sadly, many of them ended up in the scrap heap, were used for firewood or are sitting in someone's living room. That isn't their purpose. They are meant to be ridden and enjoyed by all generations."

In the fall of 1952, the Kansas State Fair in Hutchinson, Kansas, powered its last ride and spun its last cotton candy, shutting down for the season. Its Allan Herschell carousel was packed into its two tractor-trailers, stored in a field at a local sheep farm and all but forgotten. Like so many Golden Age carousels during this era, it had outlived its useful life and would be replaced by a newer machine. A once-great ride, abandoned as a burden, it remained in that field for 48 years.

Sometime in the late 1970s, Bob Lemons, a folk art collector and friend of the farmer, purchased the machine with the intent of resurrecting it to its former glory. Bob had the 36 horses stripped of their "park paint" and restored two of them, but was unable to accomplish much else. The carousel remained in its sheep meadow, packed in its trailers, as it had been since it last operated in 1952.

In 2000, I received a call from my sister-in-law wondering if her nephews would like an antique sled for Christmas. She was in Kansas City, Missouri, helping a college friend—the daughter of Bob Lemons—organize an auction of her father's collection of folk art and Americana. I jokingly asked if there happened to be an antique carousel in Bob Lemons' collection.

How could we not have pursued a deal? The stars were practically screaming at us—an intact, Golden Age carousel forgotten and languishing in a farmer's field, Reno's childhood dream, and its last place of operation was in my almost-namesake town of Hutchinson, in Reno County, no less.

Prior to the auction sale, we purchased the carousel, keeping it from being broken up and sold piecemeal. A lost carousel had been found. The journey had begun.

Without a specific plan of what to do with this historic machine, we moved it, still in its two vintage tractor-trailers, to a storage barn in Upstate New York, where it remained for another 16 years.

Finally, with encouragement from fellow NCA members, we sat down with Sandpoint's mayor in August 2016 and made our pitch—to bring the carousel there, create a community-involved restoration project and place the restored machine in a new pavilion at, hopefully, the city beach.

We decided to “jump in,” loaded the two vintage trailers onto lowboy trailers, and in November 2016 the carousel made the journey west to Idaho.

“I’ve lived here for 35 years and the community of Sandpoint has been good to me. It is my hometown,” Reno says. “I want to share something special with the town that has supported me and my family all these years, and bringing the magic of a carousel here is a way I can give something back.”

“The Carousel of Smiles,” as it is now named, was completely unloaded from its two trailers—for the first time in 64 years—on December 3, 2016. A forgotten carousel, a true time capsule and possibly the last undocumented machine left to be discovered, has found its new home in Sandpoint. It is a circa 1920 Allan Herschell three-row, 14-section, 40-foot diameter machine with 36 horses and two chariots.

This Golden Age machine is original, intact and in good condition—an historic gem, awaiting



a renewed life fulfilling its original purpose, creating memories and excitement here at its new home in Sandpoint. Hop on and help us renew the magic: TheCarouselofSmiles.org.

Tobin Fraley, in *The Great American Carousel*, best describes the drive behind this endeavor: “The ingredients that go into the universal love of carousels are definitely unique. No other aspect of our heritage can claim to combine the nostalgia, innocence, and fantasy of childhood with ... the innovations of the Industrial Revolution, and the exquisitely talented craftsmen of turn-of-the-century America. The carousel ... has etched a place not only in our history but in our hearts.”

Top, Reno and Clay Hutchison with the still-packed herd. Bottom, the horses in a Sandpoint, Idaho, warehouse-turned-event center. The trailer in the background was their home for decades.

—Clay Hutchison photos

