

Merry-Go-Roundup

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Teamwork in the Pacific Northwest

Clay Hutchison

Like many of the carousel projects undertaken in the past 40 years, the Carousel of Smiles started with passion and a dream. As a child, Reno Hutchison found her passion for merry-go-rounds riding the Allan Herschell machine at Columbia Gardens in Butte, Montana. The tragic fire that destroyed the carousel in 1973 sparked in her the dream to one day find and restore a “Golden Age” carousel and recreate the magic she so enjoyed as a child.

Reno never let go of that dream, nor her passion for carousels (we rode one on our second date). In 2000, by sheer happenstance, we heard about an intact carousel that had been languishing in two trailers in a Kansas farm field for about 48 years. We purchased it, saving it from being auctioned off horse-by-horse, and only later determined it to be a circa 1920 Allan Herschell machine. It is now the Carousel of Smiles project.

20-plus years ago, we had little time to ponder the journey upon which we were embarking. The decision was based on a few photographs and Reno’s passion. We knew only that the carousel seemed intact, needed a full restoration, and its last known operational venue was the 1952 Kansas State Fair in Hutchinson. (Hutchinson is the county seat of Reno County, so how could we, Clay and Reno Hutchison, not save it?) We bought the ride from Bob Lemons, an Americana collector and owner of several IGA grocery stores, who is credited with being one of the first to place interesting artifacts within his stores. Bob had purchased the carousel in two trailers from the carnie who had “stored” it in the farmer’s field. Soon after we moved the machine, still in its trailers, to our storage barn in Upstate New York, the question of “now what” came up. Passion and a dream started this journey, but we really had no clue what to do next.

Allan Herschell carousel, Columbia Gardens, Butte, Montana, lost to fire in 1973.

—Photo:
Paul Bingaman,
from Butte’s Pride—
The Columbia Gardens
by Pat Kearney

The Columbia Gardens fire sparked at least three carousel projects—A Carousel for Missoula, which started a movement of community-carved merry-go-rounds; the Spirit of Columbia Gardens Carousel in Butte, a 20-plus-year project with newly carved ponies; and our Carousel of Smiles.



Over the next 16 years, we drew upon expertise and knowledge from many organizations and individuals collectively connected through the NCA, and toured a great number of carousels during the annual conventions we attended. By the fall of 2016, we felt ready to launch the Carousel of Smiles project to our city and the community of Sandpoint, Idaho.

To quote Andrew Jackson, “Take time to deliberate, but when the time for action has arrived, stop thinking and go in.”

A big part in giving us the comfort to “jump in” was knowing the cooperative spirit among our diverse group of Pacific Northwest carousels. We are one of the later projects to get going in this region that includes merry-go-rounds from Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Montana, and the experiences and specific knowledge shared with us has greatly helped to plan our journey.

How fortuitous to have practically as a neighbor Bette Largent, and her willingness to exuberantly share her decades of carousel knowledge and expertise. Sandpoint is one-and-a-half hours from Spokane, Washington’s, fantastic 1909 Loeff at Riverfront Park.

A bit further down the road, in Kennewick, Washington, is the Gesa Carousel of Dreams, a wonderful collection of Carmel ponies (originally installed at Silver Beach Amusement Park, St. Joseph, Michigan, then saved by Marianne Stevens) on a newly made Carousel Works frame. Not only was this herd Reno’s inspiration for color palette and painting style, but operationally this 501(c)(3) nonprofit entity has an enviable, self sustainable plan from which we are drawing many ideas as we formulate our own tailored operational plan for Sandpoint.

The Carmel horses, painted by Bette Largent and Sue Baldwin (Sue is from the Ferry County Merry-Go-Round, an Armitage–Herschell in Republic, Washington) are spectacular, and we have been fortunate to have both of these master painters conduct workshops for our newly formed group of painters.

One day we got a call from the volunteers of A Carousel for Missoula, to our east in Montana, offering to help. The message: “We are a bunch of retired guys with sharp chisels and nothing to do.” One of our early ponies was sent on a road trip to Missoula for restoration. (Our restoration teams, the “Godfather Squad” and the “Painters of the Lost Arts,” won’t let any more horses out of our own workshops. “We only have so many to do—we want to keep them here for ourselves”



Loeff “Sneaky” tiger, Riverfront Park, Spokane, Washington.

—Photo: Clay Hutchison



Carmel horse, Gesa Carousel of Dreams, Kennewick, Washington.

—Photo: Clay Hutchison



Ferry County Merry-Go-Round, c. 1895–1900 Armitage–Herschell, Republic, Washington.

—NCA Photo Show, Nancy Morris



Above, this page and facing page, Carousel of Smiles (c. 1920 Allan Herschell) horse in four stages of restoration—stripped, wood repairs made, primed and painted.

—Photos:
Clay Hutchison

is a sentiment collectively shared by our passionate volunteers.)

A bit further away in Oregon is the Albany Historic Carousel & Museum, showcasing a 16-plus-year effort of newly carved animals on a restored, historic Dentzel frame. This group has generously shared their experiences and operational plans. In their museum annex is a remarkable collection of historic figures and carousel artifacts, many of them on loan from the Dentzel family, along with a pair of our inside scenery panels painted by L. Wagner Davis (one restored, one not). See *Merry-Go-Roundup* 46, No. 1, 2019, for more details on this aspect of the Carousel of Smiles.

Closer to home, and a few years ahead of us on the operational timeline, is the Coeur d’Alene Carousel. A 1922 Spillman Engineering “Junior” model that operated at the local Playland Pier from 1942 to 1974, it was brought back to Coeur d’Alene by passion and vision after a 37-year absence. We were fortunate to help assemble this wonderful part of local history for its June 2017 grand opening, giving us some much-needed hands-on knowledge before assembling our own carousel for its (unrestored) unveiling event that December (see our video at thecarouselofsmiles.org/videos).

Now that our restoration is well underway and we are comfortable with our methodologies,

Sir Hops-A-Lot, newly carved Easter rabbit for the Gesa Carousel of Dreams, and his team, left to right, painters for the Carousel of Smiles unless otherwise noted: Gabe Gabel; Parker Hodge (Gesa Executive Director); Meg Marchiando; Mike Thornton (Gesa carver); Sydney Icardo; Ken Johanning (Gesa); Reno Hutchison; Colleen Thornton (Gesa touch-up painter); Virginia Chavez; Wendy Lawrence. Not present, Sue Baldwin (Ferry County Merry-Go-Round painter); Jeff Rosencrans.

—Photo:
Clay Hutchison





we have been able to return the favor a bit—helping out the Coeur d’Alene Carousel with some leg repair (what carousel doesn’t have breakage?) and bringing to life Sir Hops-A-Lot, a newly carved Easter rabbit for the Gesa Carousel of Dreams.

Carved by Gesa’s master carver Mike Thornton as their fourth newly carved, special feature animal, we were honored when Sue Baldwin asked our team to take over and get the painting completed in time for the figure’s Easter unveiling. Being asked to participate in this project meant a great deal to us and all of our painters, and is indicative of the broader teamwork among carousel groups and organizations.

“Carousels are such a vibrant aspect, culturally and economically, of the communities they adopt, and to see the level of assistance and cooperation among the 20 or so carousels in the Northwest is a heartening culmination of years of work,” says Bette Largent, retired curator of Spokane’s Looft carousel and past president of the NCA.

Many of the carousels in our Pacific Northwest region have been participating in a yearly technical conference. Started by Bette Largent, this rotating gathering is a great opportunity to share technical and operational ideas and generate the synergy that is so important to keeping our carousels operating in good health. This year it was hosted by the Albany Historic Carousel & Museum, who announced the desire to spearhead the Pacific Northwest Carousel Trail Project and create the first map and carousel passport for operating carousels and in-progress projects in our region. This would include the newest addition, the Snoqualmie Valley Carousel in North Bend, Washington, a project to populate with new carvings the antique frame from Rock Springs Park, Chester, West Virginia. We will give greater detail on this exciting connective endeavor in a future article.



Left, newly carved pegasus, Albany Historic Carousel & Museum, Oregon. Below, 1922 Spillman Engineering “Junior,” Coeur d’Alene, Idaho.

—Photos:
NCA Photo Show,
Tiffany Holdahl (left),
Don Largent (below)



Several of these carousels will be visited during the 2024 NCA convention, so start making plans to join us!



Back Cover: Newly restored horses in the paint shop of the Carousel of Smiles (c. 1920 Allan Herschell), Sandpoint, Idaho. See pages 16 –19.

—Photo: Clay Hutchison