



FARMING FLOWERS, TREASURE HUNTING AND PAINTED PONIES

CAROUSEL JUST ONE PASSION AMONG MANY FOR RENO AND CLAY HUTCHISON

by Susan Drinkard

It's been more than two decades since Clay and Reno Hutchison of Sandpoint rescued a 1920s Allan Herschell carousel abandoned in two trailers in a Kansas field, coincidentally near Hutchinson, Kansas in Reno County. The couple brought the 36 ponies to Sandpoint in 2016 along with a dream to see the restored carousel horses go up and down in Sandpoint—specifically at the Sandpoint City Beach.

Since then, they've had to shake off disappointments about where the carousel would be located. Finally the couple, weary of the years of going round and round about a location, rented the former Bizarre Bazaar at Church Street and Fifth Avenue,

with an option to buy, to house the three-pony-deep merry-go-round complete with a rotating show of local artists' work in the frames behind the ponies.

Years of artistic efforts by a dedicated team skilled in woodcrafts, designing, painting, and other talents—from Spokane, Bonners Ferry, and Sandpoint—so talented and dedicated that Clay and Reno well up with gratitude and awe in the telling, have resulted in a completed carousel. And now the Carousel of Smiles has moved to its permanent location in the Granary Arts District next to Marketplace Antiques and the Pie Hut, a building the couple estimate will cost some \$2 million to turn into a permanent home.



AFTER A PARADE THROUGH SANDPOINT, THE RESTORED CAROUSEL PONIES ARE NOW STABLED AT THEIR ULTIMATE HOME IN THE GRANARY ARTS DISTRICT, IN THE BUILDING THAT FORMERLY HOUSED BIZARRE BAZAAR. COURTESY PHOTO. PREVIOUS PAGE: RENO AND CLAY HUTCHISON WITH A PAIR OF THE NEWLY RESTORED PONIES. PHOTO BY CAMERON BARNES.

A fundraising event is set for November 22-23 at the Bonner County Fairgrounds where the ponies will be riding together as a herd after years apart, surrounded by a myriad of other nonprofits.


The couple have a way of generating dedication to the project. Clay said it's because of Reno and Reno said it's because of Clay and his background, and the Sandpoint community at large.

Carousels bring for many a feeling of nostalgia for childhood joy and innocence. Reno has a wide-eyed love for the ponies and said they even whisper things to her, and each has his or her own personality now that they've been revived.

So just who are these people set to make an impact on our local scene? Well, Clay organizes car races for a living. Reno is a nutritionist. And that's just for starters.

HOW DID YOU TWO MEET?

Clay: We met up at Schweitzer in 1997. I was here doing some consulting on the mountain. I sent my two-year-old over to her to tell her she had a wonderful smile.



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Reno: I looked at him and said, “Most people use their dogs for that.”

Clay: I tried to get her to meet me for drinks over at Taps, but she didn’t show up. Six months later I got a call from Bobbie Huguenin saying there’s a gal named Reno who wants your phone number.

Reno: I didn’t show the first time because I had three kids and three jobs at the time and I didn’t feel like I had much to offer him. I had to work some things out. We had a long engagement. My oldest son, who just turned 43, is officially older than I feel now. (She laughs.) Clay has two boys and I have two boys and a girl, so we had a blended family.

SO HOW OLD ARE YOU?

Clay: I am eligible for Medicare now.
Reno: I’m 62.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU LIVED HERE?

Reno: I moved here in 1981 from Montana, a little farming and ranching community, Whitehall. My father built and owned a large greenhouse operation; he mostly farmed flowers. You are literally on 24/7. You have a crop growing every season: poinsettias for Christmastime; mums for fall; bedding plants for spring. It was one of the largest greenhouse operations in the state of Montana. We also had acreage with cattle and horses.

IS THAT WHERE YOU TRACE YOUR LOVE FOR HORSES?

Reno: I can’t remember when I didn’t love horses. My life was filled with carousel horses initially in Butte. When we moved to Whitehall my dad bought me a horse.

DID YOU HAVE AN IDYLIC CHILDHOOD?

Reno: Yes, I think I had a very idyllic childhood, unlike many childhoods today. There were expectations. We had to work. We had to feed the livestock and work in the greenhouses after school. Having that kind of responsibility at a young age has helped mold me into who I am today. Many kids are missing that today. I am not afraid of hard work.

Clay: I grew up in New York City.

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CLAY AND RENO ARE RACE OFFICIALS AS WELL AS CAROUSEL BUILDERS. CLAY IS THE OVERALL MANAGER, WHILE RENO SERVES AS GRID MARSHALL. COURTESY PHOTO.

My parents divorced when I was real young. My biological dad was a lawyer in Florida. My parents were fairly hands-off. I went to boarding school and took a year off between high school and college to travel around the world with my 35mm Nikon. That's what started my pseudo-photography career.

WHAT WAS YOUR FAVORITE PLACE?

Clay: Probably Nepal. I went climbing and trekking in Nepal. I spent a decade doing freelance photography and freelance special effects in the film world. That took me around the world four times, mostly in Asia, the South Pacific, and the Middle East. In an odd sort of way that got me some credentials as a tourism consultant, which took me to Eastern Europe. At that point, I was doing project management... I don't remember exactly how I fell into treasure hunting in Scotland, but I did that for three years. We were looking for a historic shipwreck.

Reno: See, you should just be interviewing him because he was doing all this fun stuff, and I was raising children. I had my first child at 19.

Clay: We were looking for King Charles I's baggage ferry with all the

kingly goods.

Reno: King Charles I was on his coronation tour [in the 1600s]. He was out showing off. He had carriages of silver table place settings and his sterling silver chamber pot.

Clay: It is a very historical and fascinating period in Scottish history. I was managing that, and that is how I got to Schweitzer.

DID YOU FIND THE FERRY?

Clay: No, we never found the ferry, unfortunately. It has been buried under tons of mud at the bottom of the Firth of Forth (an estuary near Kincardine, Scotland) for hundreds and hundreds of years in a shipping port.

It gave me a lot of skills because I was dealing with the Crown, governmental entities, the press, Sothebys, and the Victoria and Albert Museum (in London). It was a very educational period. A lot of high-tech equipment. It plays into this project because we could generate press. After all, it was how we got a lot of support. We had a joint operation with Prince Andrew before he was disgraced, and the Royal Navy. It was herding a lot of cats.

One of the gentlemen who was a potential investor and who was promoting



TWO FAMILIES BLENDED WITH THE HUTCHISON WEDDING: RENO'S CHILDREN ISAIAH, ZACHARY, AND LAURA AT BACK, AND CLAY'S BOYS, BYRON AND AVERY, IN FRONT OF THE COUPLE. COURTESY PHOTO.

us was also promoting Schweitzer, oddly enough, and the family that owned Schweitzer, the Brown/Huguenin family, convinced the sisters (in that family) to take a vacation to Scotland. They would tell us about what they were doing here at Schweitzer, and being a longtime skier I came out for a visit and fell in love with the hometown nature of Sandpoint in 1995. Several years later I came out here to do some consulting with Schweitzer and ended up buying some property and developed properties up there and met Reno and bought more property and moved out here in 1997.

Reno: We worked on that project together. It's called The Spires at Schweitzer. We did that until 2010.

SO YOU BOTH ARE SKIERS?

Reno: We are both skiers and divers, and we both love to travel.

WHO COOKS?

Reno: I cook. He grills.

YOU HAVE DONE SOME INTERESTING PROJECTS TOGETHER.

Clay: So we do still have a project left over from the tourism consulting days. We might get back to it. It's a medieval village outside of Prague, Rožmitál.

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INTERVIEW

Reno: Insert Munch scream! It's an old medieval village with a moat!

Clay: We (the group owning this project) did have it for sale in late 2018 to see what kind of offers we could receive. We elected not to sell it at that time. COVID hit the Czech Republic pretty hard with shutdowns, so it all went dormant. Now the desire is to generate the funds and restore it to repurpose it into an event and cultural center. It is close to Prague,

in a nice village situated in a park-like setting.

THAT IS A LOFTY GOAL

Reno: There is a lot of support and help from the local town of Rožmitál. So, the "lofty" part is the money raise!

Clay: Coming back to the carousel project, it's easy because you don't look at it all at once. You look at it in pieces.

Reno: Clay is good at looking at the big picture and breaking it down into small

bites. I tend to look at the big picture and get overwhelmed. When we first unloaded this project and looked at the scope of it, I honestly was so overwhelmed that I didn't know where to begin. I'm super thankful that Clay had the experience he did to say, "This is where we start."

Clay: Like any project, you find good people to join in. We are fortunate. That's what this project is about. It's everybody who is involved. The enthusiasm to be involved exceeded our expectations.

Reno: I'm hoping we will be able to tap into more of those resources as we move from the restoration into the operations.

RENO, YOU HAVE BEEN QUOTED AS SAYING THIS PROJECT IS TO GIVE BACK TO SANDPOINT. HOW DID SANDPOINT SUPPORT YOU IN YOUR EARLY DAYS HERE?

Reno: I was so young when I started my family. I felt supported, especially after I was moving through my divorce. It's not always easy to live here. Sometimes even in the most difficult moments the community, and the people, held me up. That feeling of support... that love... I want to give back.

WILL YOU SHARE ABOUT THE ELEVATOR?

Reno: I remember when my kids were small. We had everything, but we had nothing. We couldn't afford to ski or do some of the activities that were available to families then. The kids would get cabin fever and so would I. I used to take them to Gunning's Alley in the middle of winter to ride the elevator.

One of the things I see the carousel bringing to the community is something for families to do, especially during the winter and shoulder seasons, especially for families who don't have the resources to ski.

Clay: I believe the carousel will be a nice public gathering spot.

Reno: It will be a place for families to come together and enjoy being together



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and have the magic of a carousel to create memories. I would love to tie in with a place like Creations to have a table of carousel-related art projects. The carousel will bring a year-round activity to Sandpoint.

What I feel when I see carousels is tangible magic...There is so little magic in our world today. I think it's important to bring magic back, and that's what we hope to do with the Carousel of Smiles.

AFTER NEARLY 20 YEARS OF WORKING ON THIS PROJECT, WHAT WILL YOU DO AFTER THE CAROUSEL IS OPERATIONAL?

Clay: There are a few other carousels out there that need restoration. We have assembled a great team, and we might turn this merry band into a full-blown carousel restoration division.

Reno: Insert Munch scream!

Keep up with carousel happenings at www.thecarouselofsmiles.org 



WITH WORK ABLE TO RESUME AFTER A SHUTDOWN INITIATED BY THE COVID PANDEMIC, THE HUTCHISONS CAN NOW TURN THEIR ATTENTION BACK TO THE RESTORATION OF ROŽMÍTAL, A MEDIEVAL VILLAGE IN PRAGUE. PHOTO BY JIŘÍ JIROUŠEK, CC BY-SA 4.0.

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