



Merry-Go-Roundup

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Edmonton's Carousels and Other Rides

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Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, has a century-long history with carousels. Sometime in the 1920s a Parker machine came to Borden Park and remained there until the late 1930s. A horse presently at the Edmonton Artifacts Center is all that remains of this ride. From 1919 to 1930, Philadelphia Toboggan Company Carousel #40 regularly made its rounds to five cities including Edmonton through the Johnny J. Jones Exposition, an American carnival company contracted by the Exhibition Grounds personnel to bring a midway to the city. This merry-go-round is best known for something that happened not in Edmonton but in Calgary. In 1919, World War I flying ace Fred McCall's airplane stalled while he was barnstorming, and rather than crashing into the crowd, he landed the plane on top of the carousel (see Charlotte Dinger's *Art of the Carousel*, page 18). No one was hurt and the ride was running again by later that day.

C. W. Parker horse from what is believed to have been Edmonton's first carousel.

—All photos in article:
Bertram & Laura Sluys



And then World War II started. And Edmonton didn't see another wooden carousel for 65 years.

Today you can find carousels in the city. Sure, there's the fiberglass one at West Edmonton Mall. But you and your family can ride authentic wooden machines, too, thanks to over 100 volunteer carvers and craftspeople under the direction of head carver Doug Warren. These people have given over 130,000 volunteer hours to the building of three carousels and two chair-o-plane rides, starting with a merry-go-round that now spins at Fort Edmonton.

The cover story of *Merry-Go-Roundup* 33, No. 3, 2006, is an article on the Fort Edmonton Park carousel by John J. Chalmers. It gives excellent information on the creation of the ride. Another of Chalmers's articles was published in *Merry-Go-Roundup* 31, No. 1, 2004. I've also used information from Kathy Coccio's *Making Memories*, published in 2006 by the Fort Edmonton Foundation, and interviews with several people.

Midway Carousel, Fort Edmonton Park

In the late 1990s a group of people met to discuss the possibility of building a carousel for the 1920s-style midway that was planned for Fort Edmonton. A long-term plan for this midway had been drawn up in 1994 and was approved in 1999. By spring 2000 several volunteers for the carousel project had been mustered. They decided to style the ride after PTC #40, with its Edmonton history. Many volunteers had no carving experience and no one had carved or painted a horse. So in July 2000 several members of the committee went to Missoula, Montana, to meet with Bob Cherot, who was originally from Edmonton, and Chuck Kaporich. Both instructed them on carving techniques and Bette Largent did a mini workshop on painting. Then the volunteers started carving. In fall 2000 the committee began a publicity campaign and a search for additional volunteers. Many people and organizations sponsored horses and other

parts of the carousel. The horses were carved primarily at the Fort Edmonton site. Bette came to Edmonton for a week-long painting workshop in October 2001. The Midway Carousel was opened to the public on July 1, 2006.

This three-row machine has 32 horses and two chariots. Each horse took approximately 500 hours to carve and an additional 250 hours to finish and paint. The ride is 40 feet in diameter and weighs 24,000 pounds. Its rounding boards depict historical scenes from around Edmonton. Altogether over 50,000 volunteer hours were spent on this carousel.

The 2006 *Merry-Go-Roundup* article lists some of the carvers and service people and the exceptional work they accomplished. A few will be added here. The pavilion that houses the carousel was designed by Burgess Bredo. He kept the traditional look of a carousel building while adding fireproof materials and allowing more interior space. There were also a few carvers who never got to see the project completed. In 2003 Gus Buysen died. He had carved a horse by himself, showing that volunteers truly could build this carousel. In 2005 Bob Young died after carving a horse and giving much-needed advice for the project.

Many, but not all, of the horses have a 1920s-era PTC look about them. Some are based on other styles, such as “Gus,” named for Gus Buysen and modeled after a horse on the Stein & Goldstein carousel at Bushnell Park in Hartford, Connecticut. Other horses are original designs. “Memory” was sponsored by several people who inscribed on her the names of departed loved ones. Another horse, named “Blink,” has on its side the instruments and tools that the explorer David Thompson carried with him across the Canadian West (outside-row horse on front cover). “Borden” was based on the only known surviving horse from the Parker carousel that was at Borden Park in Edmonton.

Each horse has its own story behind it. “Canadian, Eh?” was designed after the volunteers sent their plans for a police horse to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The RCMP gave their permission, and Richard Bechtel was put in charge of the project. The Southeast Edmonton Seniors Association carved it as a group in their own building. The RCMP had given some design ideas, including the insignia with the queen’s crown over it. Doug Warren caught a mistake—there was a king, not a queen, in 1920. So Doug researched the king’s crown and copied that one instead. The RCMP liked the horse so much that they had the team carve one for them, too!

The Fort Edmonton carvers were not alone in their endeavors. The frame was constructed by Chuck Kaporich of Missoula, Montana. He had spearheaded the community-carved carousel in Missoula, completed in 1995. There is a tradition with these projects wherein once a carousel is finished, a horse is made for another machine underway. “Ambassador” came to Edmonton from the carvers in Salem, Oregon; this horse carries the American and Canadian flags of the 1920s. “Centurion,” the armored, lead horse, was carved by Bob Cherot in the Missoula area. Still another horse, “Bonnie,”



Top, “Canadian, Eh?” and detail of the steed’s Mounted Police logo and king’s crown. Bottom, “Gus,” based on a Stein & Goldstein horse. Both, Midway Carousel, Fort Edmonton Park.





Top left, "Centurion."
Bottom left,
"Ambassador."
Both, Midway
Carousel, Fort
Edmonton Park.



Top right,
children's carousel.
Bottom right, bug
chair-o-plane.
Both Fort Edmonton
Park, both hand-
cranked.



was carved primarily in Missoula and then sent to Edmonton for sanding and painting. The decorative elements represent the provincial/state birds and flowers: the owl by her cantle and the wild rose stand for Alberta while the meadowlark and the bitter stand for Missoula.

Chair-o-Plane and Hand-Cranked Rides

After they finished the Fort Edmonton Park carousel, many carvers wanted to keep carving. What better way to put their new skills to use than to make more rides for the midway? So they built a Victorian-style children's carousel and a chair-o-plane ride. On the latter, the ten

flying bug seats swing from chains, while on the carousel, the animals are on poles. Neither machine has a motor. They are cranked by hand "the old-fashioned way." The rides go in opposite directions so the operators can get a workout with both arms.

There are 12 figures on the children's carousel: six horses and six other animals. At first the menagerie figures were on the outside row, but they suffered a large amount of wear and tear. The horses are now on the outside row since they are easier to repair. Recently large canopies were erected to cover the two rides which not only protects them but also covers the perimeter walkway. This means the rides can operate in a light rain.

The cat on the children's carousel has an interesting story. It holds a magpie in its mouth. The Dentzel cats that inspired this figure normally carry birds from the eastern coast, while the magpie is definitely a western bird. What happened? One night the designer was kept awake by the calls of a magpie. The next day she designed the cat, getting her revenge on the bird by putting its likeness in the cat's mouth and naming the figure "Dinnertime."

My family visited the Midway Carousel at Fort Edmonton Park in 2014. The workshop was also open, so we admired the six spare horses on display and spoke with head carver Doug Warren. He talked about the full-size chair-o-plane ride they were building (flying aces including Fred McCall are honored on the inside panels). Doug also told us about the new project they had just started—carving figures for a renovation to the kiddie carousel at the Edmonton Valley Zoo. The first animals in progress, a mallard duck and lemur, were on display.

Two years later, we were honored to receive a special tour of the workshop by Doug Warren. This facility was given by Fort Edmonton to the carvers of the Midway Carousel after its completion. Many fascinating things lined the rooms: figures in various stages of carving for the zoo carousel, carved animals used in education classes, prototypes and miniatures of carousel figures, a PTC-style rounding board, a working drill press and more.

Doug then took us on a tour of the Midway Carousel, the hand-cranked children's carousel and the now-completed replica of a W. F. Mangels chair-o-plane ride (below). The original mechanism could not be used, so reverse engineering was employed and an all-new,

stronger mechanism was built and donated to Fort Edmonton by ATCO Gas.

Edmonton Valley Zoo Carousel

In 2012, the volunteer carvers had started what would eventually become 25 figures, two chariots and 52 decorative panels for the kiddie carousel at the Edmonton Valley Zoo, representing endangered and North American species. The original carousel was built circa 1959 by the Allan Herschell Company. The zoo kept this machine running for 60 years with a lot of coaxing and coddling and many parts replaced several times. It finally reached the point that it couldn't run safely anymore, operating outdoors with only a canopy to protect it during the summer and the frame left exposed in the winter.

Only a few pieces of the original mechanism could be salvaged for this major restoration project. None of the original rounding boards, shields or decking were usable. Doug Warren told us, "All components were subjected to non-destructive testing and finite element analysis. The entire mechanism was rendered in CAD (computer-aided design) through reverse engineering. The Northern Alberta Institute of Technology has redesigned the power distribution, the sound system, the controls." Doug also explained that the motor, speed reducer and electric gear were all very old and parts could no longer be found. He was most excited about the new lighting. "It has 1,000-plus LEDs as opposed to the dozen 12-inch fluorescent tubes which were all that remained of the original lighting system—and the new lighting takes less electricity, too!" A variable



"Dinnertime," cat with magpie on hand-cranked children's carousel, Fort Edmonton Park.

Left, replica of W. F. Mangels chair-o-plane, Fort Edmonton Park. Right, Allan Herschell kiddie carousel, Edmonton Valley Zoo, as it appeared before its recent restoration.





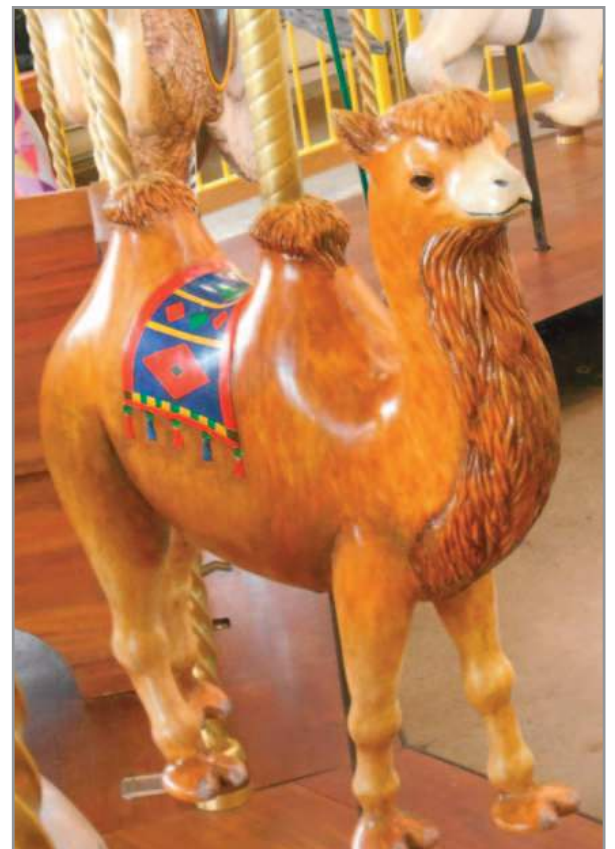
All photos this page, Edmonton Valley Zoo kiddie carousel following restoration. Note that the howling wolf's eyes are closed.

frequency drive, a computer controlling the new motor's operation, has replaced the controls. The drive system has also been replaced. The new deck is made of South American hard woods that should last at least 60 years. Doug said many people were excited to help. Machining and mechanical work, welding, lighting and electrical work, a public

address system and programming were all completed by volunteers.

Tammy Wiebe, executive director of Valley Zoo Development Society, explained to us the zoo and society's core values and mission "on education and conservation of the animals in our care, and on our planet." Jean Jackson said their idea "was not only to replace worn parts and give (the kiddie carousel) a face lift but also to turn it into a machine that could both entertain and educate the riders." The society has a program which brings in school classes to visit the zoo and learn about conservation. The reimagined carousel fits the program perfectly. It is filled with details that are meant to teach people about wildlife. The wolf is howling with its eyes shut, the way wolves howl. Many animals have a map of their habitat such as Madagascar on the lemur and Alberta on the great horned owl (the provincial bird), and the animals on the shields are encircled by their footprints.

More than 60 volunteers have spent over 25,000 hours crafting the new wooden parts of this carousel. Five of the 25 figures are spares, for variety or to fill in for animals under repair. Each figure took over 350 hours to carve. Edmonton Valley Zoo personnel chose animals from endangered species and from the Species Survival Plan. The zoo is deeply involved with both. The Goeldi's monkey wooden bench can be removed for a wheelchair. The rounding





boards illustrate the skin or fur patterns of various animals on the carousel while the shields display three more endangered species: meerkat, poison dart frog and burrowing owl.

In 2023 we were able to interview several people involved with the project. Judy McTavish started out as a painter on the Fort carousels, but has also learned to carve. One of her works is the capybara. She also does restoration at the Fort. Anna Gablenz started painting 20 years ago. She carved the wolf and painted the lemur, tiger and the animals on the inside panels. Anna also designed the carousel's new panels.

Jean Jackson has carved several figures since 2001. She was the primary carver on the lemur and assisted with the armadillo. Jean also gives tours of the workshop at the Fort. She wrote, "I am still in awe of the fact that a small group of people believed that they could create a beautiful, working work of art using only chisels, sandpaper, paint brushes and time. I never tire of looking at what we created, and always enjoy the look on someone's face when he/she suddenly realizes that the horses and other animals truly are handmade."

Painter Marilyn Heise wrote, "I was enrolled in the carvers workshop by a friend...I had an interest in art that really wasn't developed but I was willing to give it a try. Anna Gablenz mentored me painting a small cougar (behind the saddle on) a Fort Edmonton Park carousel horse and I guess that I passed muster. I was given a wallaby carved by Ron Pettit as my first (zoo carousel) animal...soon I discovered that if I wasn't pleased with the marks I was making, I could erase with paint thinner and start over... Painting these animals has been such an enriching experience for me (and) has reinforced... that taking a risk has its own reward."

Several volunteers were staff or alumni of the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology,

including mechanic/machinist Gord Neufeld and cabinet maker Lee Walsh.

The Valley Zoo Development Society raised money for the refurbishment by offering sponsorships of the figures and chariots to zoo and Fort supporters. There were on-site campaigns, collectible items were sold and many donors chipped in, too. Gregg Distributors donated the temporary weatherproof structure (Covid delayed the building of a permanent housing) as well as warehouse space for the initial reassembly of the carousel.

Six of the machine's original Allan Herschell aluminum horses have been repainted as they might have looked when new. Five of these are displayed alongside the carousel in honor of its first 60 years at the zoo. Another stands at Fort Edmonton with one that is not restored, the latter representing 60 years of wear and tear. The other 13 are carefully stored at the Edmonton Artifacts Center. Once the carousel's permanent structure is completed, the workshop painters plan to repaint and display all of the horses.

The carvers workshop has finished its work on the zoo ride, now renamed the Conservation Carousel, although they are available for repairing any damage to the figures. Doug Warren introduced me to Jenn and Katie, the zoo personnel who keep the carousel running. They operate the ride and also do the maintenance on it. However, the carvers at the workshop still keep themselves quite busy keeping up the carousels and chair-o-planes at the Fort. They are now starting to strip portions of animals on the big carousel and repaint them. They are also carving half-size replicas of figures on the zoo's carousel. These are sold to raise money for maintenance costs.

To ride the zoo's carousel, children must be under 127 centimeters (50 inches) tall.

Left, mallard duck on Edmonton Valley Zoo kiddie carousel. Right, repainted Allan Herschell horse from same carousel, now on display alongside the machine.

The zoo carousel has been widely reported on in recent years, and some of this information has been included here: CTV News by Karyn Mulcahy on March 29, 2021, and by Andrea Dion on October 13, 2022; CBC News by Emily Pasiuk and Lauren Fink on April 4, 2021; TechLifeToday by Nicole Graham on October 13, 2022; and an interview with Doug Warren posted on YouTube.