CAROUSEL HORSES

What is the first amusement park ride you rode on? For many of us it was a horse on a carousel. As children, most of us fell in love with these lifeless animals, but as we grew older we lost interest in the merry-go-round and its horses. However, there are still a few people like Harold Baker who care about the carousel horses.

Harold first started collecting carousel horses and many other American antiques about 25 years ago. When he started, there were only 12 collectors in the United States, today there are more than 3,500. Since his collection started it has grown to approximately 35 horses. His oldest horse dates back to 1876 and has never been restored. “I just never had the heart to restore him,” Harold said. Most of his horses were carved from 1900 to 1930 when the carousel horse was in its prime. Most horses are of bass and linden wood and were carved by European immigrants.

Have you ever wondered why a carousel horse’s head faces to the right? The reason is the American carousel spins counter-clockwise, therefore, the right side is seen more than the left side. The right side also is referred to as the romance side; it has fake jewels on it to make it look more attractive to someone who might want to ride it. You can tell an American horse from an English horse by the way the head is turned (the English carousel spins clockwise).

Because he likes to carve, Harold doesn’t collect the newer horses, made of fiberglass. In the early days of carousels all horses were made of wood. From 1927 to 1930 the wooden horses were phased out because they were hard to maintain due to the Great Depression. So the manufacturers of the lifeless animals made iron horses, which weren’t successful because they felt cold to riders. A few people were even killed when the horses they were sitting on were struck by lightning. After this, the manufacturers tried putting rubber saddles on these horses. This didn’t work either, because of the wear and tear on the rubber material. Today all carousel horses are made of fiberglass because fiberglass is easy to maintain. But Mr. Baker doesn’t collect the fiberglass or iron horses.

Harold takes great pride in his restorations. The legs and ears are the parts of the horse that most often need replacing. The legs will break or rot and the ears are easily broken off. Most of the horses he gets are in disrepair; sometimes a leg will have been nailed together because this was cheaper than making a new leg. Almost always the ears are broken off. Harold remedies this by carving a new ear or ears out of bass or linden wood. The ears are especially hard to carve because of their small size. The first thing Harold does to restore these creatures is remove all paint with a propane torch, a putty knife, and a wire brush. Some of the horses have up to 40 coats of paint on them. After the paint is removed, Harold takes the horses apart down to the frame. He replaces broken parts and injects the rotted places with “Penta,” a preservative and diesel fuel; this prevents further corrosion. When he has the frame the way he wants it, he puts the body and legs back on. After the glue dries, Harold paints the entire horse. It takes Harold about two weeks to do a restoration, if he works steadily.

Mr. Baker considers each horse to have its own personality and considers the carousel horse to be one of the earliest forms of American folk art. He mentioned he would have liked to have seen what each horse has gone through and where it has been.
By Ken Thomas
Mark Wray

Harold considers his carousel horse collection and restoration a hobby. He says he can’t do the same thing to long; he’ll work on a horse for a while and then he’ll do something else. Harold says, “Restoring the horse is just something I like to do, but I do get tired of it sometimes.”

He won’t sell a horse, but he may trade to get a horse he doesn’t have. Always looking for another horse, he travels all over the country. He particularly likes the Southwest and he especially likes New Orleans, Louisiana. He usually finds about one or two horses a year.

Mr. Baker doesn’t limit himself to the collection of just carousel horses; he also collects assorted and various antiques. He lives on a Christmas tree farm and that keeps him busy most of the day. He’s used to being busy; he operated Baker Sign Company for 42 years which explains why he can paint so well. He continues to use his painting talents to paint pictures of carousel horses on velvet. He also has in his possession a 1914 Wurlitzer Band Organ which he calls his “Pink Lemonade Machine.” It plays eight songs on a roll which lasts about an hour.

Harold sees something unique in everything. He also has the skill to make something that looks like junk to you or me into something of beauty. Harold Baker is truly a remarkable man.

Photo below: A completely restored horse shown from the romance side in Mr. Baker’s home.

Top photo: Harold and his restored barber pole in front of the workshop. Bottom photo shows Mr. Baker’s Wurlitzer Band Organ.