

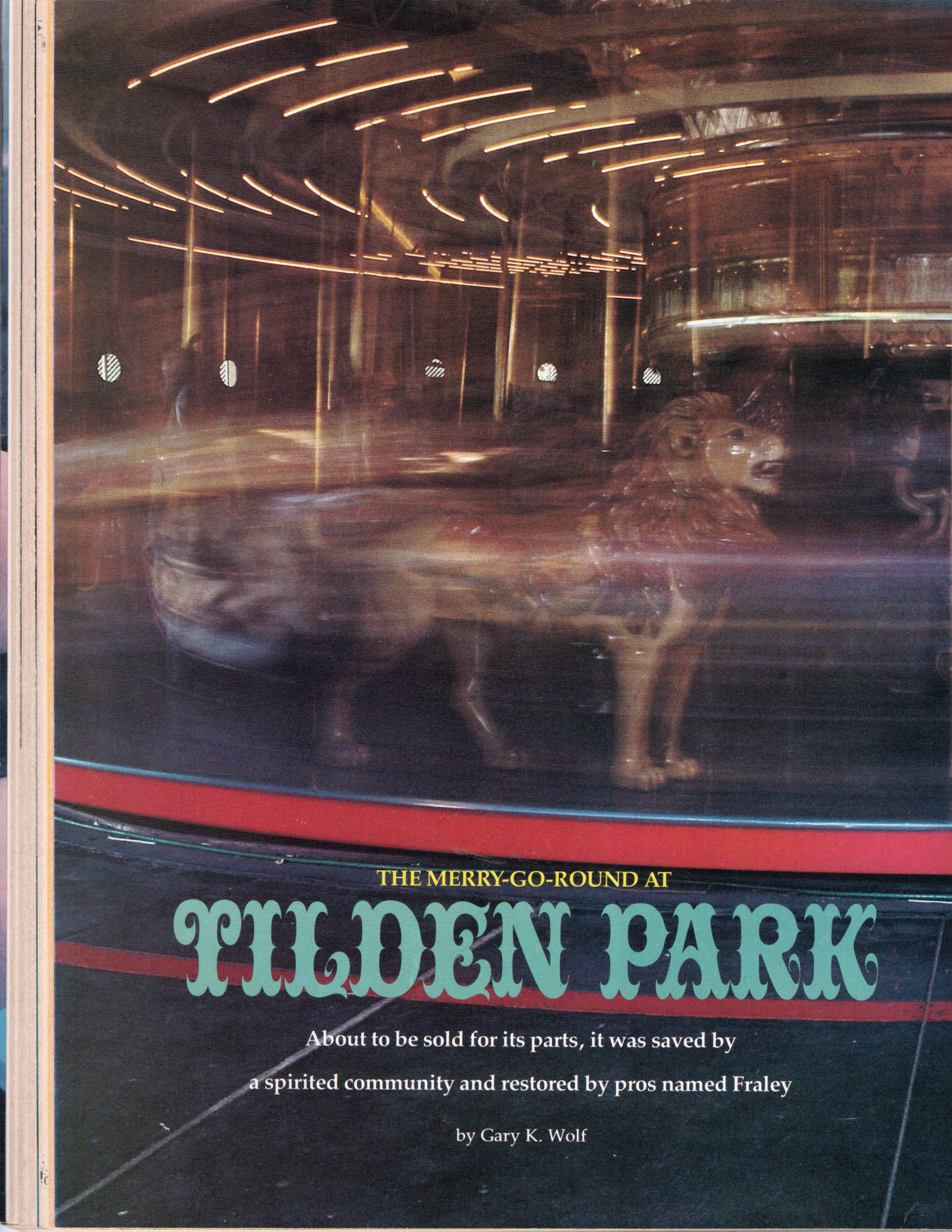
# AMERICANA

SEPTEMBER / OCTOBER 1979



Restored and Running:

A Steed from the  
Herschell-Spillman Stable



THE MERRY-GO-ROUND AT

# MILDEN PARK

About to be sold for its parts, it was saved by  
a spirited community and restored by pros named Fraley

by Gary K. Wolf



In Berkeley, California, public causes are generally political and turbulent. Thus it was remarkable when a few years ago Berkeley citizens marched in the streets to the beat of a different drum—actually, to the tune of an antique band organ.

Berkeley was about to lose its hand-carved wooden merry-go-round, located in a serene forest high in the hills of Tilden Park. Built “back East” in 1911, the machine represents a particularly fine example of the carousel indus-

*In front of the Tilden Park carousel, which they restored, Maurice and Nina Fraley pose beside a friendly giraffe.*



The photographs on this page show the carousel rooster undergoing restoration—stripping, repair, and repainting. A professional stripper examines the rooster, top, before it is sprayed with paint solvent. Using brushes with soft copper bristles, Victor and Bob Dhont, second from top, scrub off old paint. At the Fraleys' shop, a belt clamp is used, above, to secure the rooster's repaired leg while the glue dries. Before repainting, Maurice sprays two undercoats of white paint on the rooster, right.



try's golden era, from early in the 1900's to the first years of the Great Depression, when metal or fiberglass animals were substituted for wooden ones.

Tilden Park's merry-go-round carries the traditional herd of horses. But it also boasts enough additional species to stock a good-sized ark. Included in this petrified zoo are giraffes, roosters, zebras, and frogs, as well as a lion, tiger, dragon, deer, goat, pig, cat, dog, and stork. The merry-go-round is one of only seven such menagerie-style machines built by the Herschell-Spillman Company that are still operating. In addition, the Tilden Park carousel is listed in the *National Register of Historic Places*.

For roughly three decades, the merry-go-round was owned and operated in Tilden Park by a private entrepreneur. Unable to meet operating expenses, he decided to put the unit up for sale. In the process, he found that the parts were worth far more than the machine as a whole. Numerous potential buyers came forth, but without exception they planned to disassemble the machine and sell off the carved animals, piece by piece, to antiques collectors willing to pay from \$1,500 to \$6,000 each.

Dismayed by the prospect of such a loss, a group of Berkeleyites launched a campaign to keep the merry-go-round operating in the park. From that point on, the private antiques collectors did not stand a chance. Grass-roots activists lobbied state and local politicians; newspaper articles and television programs pleaded for funds; schoolchildren contributed pennies and dimes. Their efforts generated \$8,000, far short of the \$85,000 needed to buy the merry-go-round but enough to convince the East Bay Regional Park District of its importance to the city's inhabitants. Park officials therefore put up the entire purchase price, and in 1977 a proud city bought the old amusement outright for its own use.

The merry-go-round had not been repainted or reconditioned for thirty years, so the park department promptly applied to the federal government for funds to restore it. The Department of the Interior's Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service responded with a \$20,000 grant, which the park district matched by adding \$12,000 of its money to the \$8,000 raised by Berkeley citizens.

A pair of long-time Berkeley residents, Maurice and Nina Fraley, undertook the actual restoration work. The choice was inevitable: the Fraleys happened to be the only people in Berkeley—or anywhere in the world—who work full time selling, repairing, and restoring merry-go-round animals. They recently collaborated on a book about the history and styles of merry-go-rounds entitled *The American Carousel*.

**A** gentle, folksy couple, the Fraleys, now in their early fifties, have practiced their craft for nearly thirty years. Unable to continue operating a merry-go-round inherited from Nina's family, they abandoned everything but the animals, which they painstakingly restored for their own enjoyment. "We saw in those animals a unique form of artistic expression," recalls Nina. "They were not intended to be works of art, yet the carvers who worked on them took a personal interest in each creation. They gave the animals character and charm, and each came away with a distinct personality."

What started as a hobby soon turned into a business. The Fraleys began to restore merry-go-round animals for museums and private collectors. Their Redbug Workshop in Berkeley rapidly became a favorite spot where browsers could drop in and spend a few enchanted moments wandering through a land of childhood fantasy and memories.

**A**fter nineteen years of restoring mostly single animals destined for static display, the Fraleys were delighted at the prospect of once again tackling an operating merry-go-round, with its lights, music, and motion. At the outset, however, the project almost overwhelmed the couple. The Fraleys restore individual animals at the average rate of one every two weeks. Thus, at their normal pace, the sixty Tilden Park animals should have taken about two years; but the government contract gave them only nine months. The Fraleys normally charge about \$1,500 to restore an animal; the grant allotted them less than \$700 per animal. By strictly regimenting their procedures, adhering to a rigid timetable, and taking on several young assistants, the Fraleys determined that they could meet this demanding schedule and still stay within budget.

Unfortunately, the merry-go-round refused to cooperate. Except for a short winter shutdown, it continued to operate throughout the restoration process. As a result, animals had to be removed in limited numbers and in careful sequence to preserve the speed and balance of the machine. Each Monday Maurice detached four "old" animals and replaced them with four restored ones—a seemingly simple procedure. In the thirty years since the animals had last been removed, however, the pins holding them in place had frozen solid. Swapping batches of animals, scheduled to take a few hours, wound up being an all-day job.

**O**ther problems arose. Once removed from the machine, the animals had to be stripped of paint. To save money, the Fraleys intended to strip only the most heavily painted and intri-



*Part of the carousel restoration involved cleaning and revarnishing the painted panels on the outside rounding board.*

cately carved animals—the deer, goat, rooster, cat, stork, and lion. The rest would be washed with a strong cleanser to remove oil, dirt, and grease, then spot sanded to smooth flaking paint, with new paint applied directly over old.

But the previous restoration had given the animals two coats of an extremely hard paint. When the Fraleys attempted to sand it smooth, it flaked off in ragged chunks. New paint could thus not have been applied smoothly over old, so every inch of old paint had to be stripped.

The stripped animals first went to Maurice for structural repair. They had reached the age of sixty-eight in remarkably hardy shape. The merry-go-round's enclosed housing had protected them well from the elements, the prime cause of dry rot and warping. The greatest damage had been done by inconsiderate riders.

"People take a hundred and forty thousand rides a year on this machine," notes Maurice. "Most of these people treat the carousel with the care it deserves, but the few who don't cause considerable damage. For instance, many years ago the merry-go-round operator added leather belts to hold children on. Some riders used these belts to whip the horses instead, and the belt buckle gouged deep grooves with every smack. My goal is to repair these animals so solidly that they last at least two hundred more years."

To lengthen the life of his restoration, Maurice deviated slightly from the construction methods used by the original carvers. Herschell-Spillman, which had its factory in North Tonawanda, New York, constructed animals from yellow poplar, a medium-hard wood easily carved and readily available in that region. To join the wood, the carvers used the best adhesive then available: rabbit's-hide glue, a water-soluble substance with a disturbing tendency to dissolve in the foggy Berkeley air.

As an alternative, Maurice first used white glue, which formed a strong bond but required that the glued pieces be in close contact. Because of warping, such precision was seldom possible. Epoxy cement, which could function as both glue and filler, was more successful; but once dry it was almost impossible to carve or sand. Finally he discovered the perfect complement to epoxy cement—the plastic filler commonly used in automotive shops, which dries in five minutes. Maurice can now fill a crack with epoxy cement and seal it with plastic filler. He can then handle the animal freely and carve and sand the plastic filler almost as easily as wood.

Using these two substances, Maurice could have removed every nick from the animals. He decided not to. "The animals were not absolutely smooth to start with," he explains, "because the merry-go-round manufacturers could not afford to take that much time with each carving. So it wouldn't be quite in keeping with their heritage to give the animals a blemish-free finish. Besides, if you do that, they begin to look plastic. These animals are old, and I try to leave in enough surface imperfections to let a rider know that



To transport the animals, Fraley installed poles on a truck bed. With an assistant, above, he unloads a group of stripped animals.

this animal has been around for awhile."

In deciding which nicks and cracks to eliminate, Maurice usually let the lines of the animal guide him. He removed anything that intruded on the carver's original intent—a semicircular gouge made by a harness ring, for instance, or the glue line of a jaggedly broken leg. He left minor cracks in the animals' laminations ("so people can get some idea of how they're put together"), as well as enough surface imperfections to demonstrate age and wear.

After filling and regluing comes sanding, the single area where Maurice flatly rejects modern technology. "I tried various electric sanders," he says, pointing to several on a shelf above his workbench. "They sped up my sanding tremendously, but they robbed me of my feel for the carver's subtle indentations and accents. Sanding the old-fashioned way, by hand, I can be sure I'm not





*Guided by a magazine photograph, Nina Fraley repaints the tiger's stripes in a manner that emphasizes the animal's power and strength.*

going to remove any intricate details accidentally."

When they were smooth and structurally sound again, the animals went to Nina, whose soft-spoken, poetic manner is perfectly suited to a painter of carousel figures. She began her painting career at the age of ten by brushing color onto the fence posts surrounding her family's amusement park and went on to major in zoology and art in college. Although park officials wanted her to use original colors in the restoration, Nina proposed a different color scheme. The colors and style of application could be in keeping with Herschell-Spillman traditions; but because subsequent touchups would have to be done by the park department, standard paint colors were chosen so that they would be easily available.

"The true artists on these merry-go-rounds were the carvers, not the painters," she says as she flips through her extensive photo library searching for pictures of

Herschell-Spillman animals bearing original paint. "The carvers learned their trade doing furniture, ships' figureheads, cigar-store Indians, and circus wagons, and their work was generally good. The quality of the painting, however, varied enormously. Herschell-Spillman did some striping and dappling, but mostly stuck to simple primary colors."

Nina spent a great deal of time considering the visual impact of each animal and of the machine as a whole—how it would appear as it stood still and as it spun around. She drew up and discarded scores of tentative color schemes before finally settling on one that combined eye-catching appeal and practicality. For the horses she chose white, gray, chestnut, and palomino, light colors that set the animals apart from their dark background. Selecting a variety of trim colors, she applied them according to a strict formula: lighter shades for large areas, darker for small areas. "The eye sees a large pastel area as equal in intensity to a small deep-toned one," Nina explains. "This way, I give the animals visual balance."

She painted the animals with alkyd oil enamel rather than epoxy paint. "Epoxies tend to soften under heat. Just the warmth generated by someone sitting on a saddle could begin to lift the paint. In addition, you have to apply epoxy with a spray gun, which makes it very hard to touch up. Tilden Park has one man with a paint brush, and I had to make it easy for him to keep up the machine. Once regular maintenance slacks off, a machine's appearance goes downhill lickety-split."

On most of her restoring jobs, Nina custom mixes her paints, but she is



*The photographs at left show how the Fraleys restored the finish on the carousel animals. Far left, Nina brushes an antiquing glaze onto the lion and then uses a pouncing brush to accent carving details. The remaining glaze is wiped off the paws, teeth, tail, and body, giving the finished lion a durable surface with an antique look.*

usually painting animals that will enter the protected environment of a collector's living room or a museum's gallery. So at Tilden Park, where the work would require periodic touchups, she used only readily available commercial paint. Nina usually applies the undercoat by hand because it gives her an overall feel for the animal. On Tilden Park's rushed timetable, however, Maurice applied the undercoat and the horses' body colors for her with a spray gun. But she staunchly insisted on doing the horses' trim and all parts of the other animals in her traditional manner. She feels that hand-painting enables her to highlight detail and give the paint a more interesting texture.

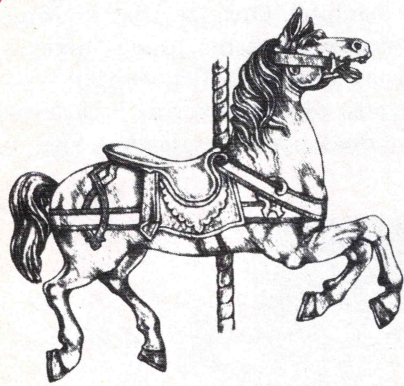
**W**hen Nina paints a carousel animal, say a zebra, she studies many photographs of zebras—but only for inspiration. She does not aim for a perfect wooden replica of the animal. "That's not what the carvers were after," she maintains. "They didn't intend to make merry-go-round animals look exactly like their real-life counterparts, but to capture the animal's spirit. I can't transfer a tiger's coloration stripe for stripe from the actual to the wooden. The wooden tiger is bulkier, with a bigger, fuller chest. The carvers altered the



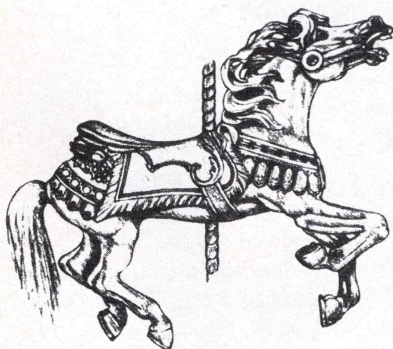
One of the most realistically carved animals in the Herschell-Spillman menagerie is the reindeer, which also sports real antlers.

tiger's anatomy to give a better impression of power and strength. It's the same with the other animals. To give the frog some dignity, the carvers put him into a frock coat. They even took liberties with the horses, extending their heads and legs into a more linear configuration to heighten the impression of speed."

After the paint dried, Nina coated the animals with a mixture of turpentine, linseed oil, varnish, and coloring tint, basically the same solution used as a



Philadelphia Style  
Coney Island Style



## A Guide to Carver

CARVING CAROUSEL ANIMALS was an anonymous art. The countless woodcarvers and artisans who turned out the animals between 1880 and 1920, the heyday of carousel manufacturing, never signed their work, and the names of most of them are not known today. Certain carvers, however, can be identified by the details they used to personalize their work. Salvatore Cernigliaro, master carver for the Dentzel Company, decorated the saddles of his horses with a clown holding a hoop in his hand. Another Dentzel carver, Daniel Muller, combined woodworking skills with an interest in the Civil War, leaving his imprint in the form of carefully detailed cavalry equipment carved into the saddle. Like these carvers, the ten carousel companies that dominated the industry produced carousel animals, particularly horses, in distinct styles. These companies also applied corporate signatures to carousel horses using metal plaques, carved or stenciled initials, and even portraits of the company owner done in relief. The major styles and the companies that developed them are described below.

### Philadelphia Style: *The Dentzel Company*

The Dentzel Company was one of three carousel manufacturers located in Philadelphia. (The other two were the Philadelphia Toboggan Company and the Daniel Muller Company.) A Dentzel horse, top left, can be recognized by its realistically delicately formed features and muscle structure, flowing, gently curving mane, and short, flat saddle with few trappings such as jewels or interwoven straps.

### Coney Island Style: *Charles Looff Company*

The Charles Looff Company built the first carousel for the Coney Island Amusement Park and was the leader of a group of Brooklyn, New York, carousel manufacturers that also included the Marcus Ilions Company and Stein and Goldstein. The Looff horse, bottom left, is a flamboyant, gaudy creature with a wildly flowing golden mane and a natural horsehair tail. Its elaborate decorations include tassels and dozens of mirrored glass jewels. To heighten the rider's sense of motion, Looff carved the horses in exaggerated postures, arching their necks, for example, suggest the fast pace of a full gallop.





Whimsical details, such as the beagle's face carved in the reindeer's saddle, are trademarks of the Herschell-Spillman carvers.

glaze in oil paintings. She selectively wiped off this coating, leaving only enough to enhance the three-dimensional character of the carvings, to highlight detail, and to make the animals look older.

Nina finished the animals with two coats of satin-sheen varnish. "High-gloss varnish would give better protection," she says, "but it wouldn't look right. It would be fine for a carnival merry-go-round surrounded by games, crowds, and lots of frenzied

activity. But that hard shine would be terribly out of place in the quiet, woody setting of Tilden Park. Out there I wanted to achieve a softer look, the kind I get with satin sheen."

Only one step then remained: returning the animals to the merry-go-round.

From start to finish, the restoration took the Fraleys nine and a half months. Despite the many problems and the time it took from their regular and more lucrative restoration business, the Fraleys plan to accept work on other merry-go-rounds. "One trip to Tilden Park early on a foggy morning, and all the minor annoyances vanish," says Nina. "The organ pumps out its bouncy refrain, the lights wink on through the mist, and the animals take their first spin of the day. A few early risers make their way to the carousel, pay their quarters, and climb aboard. When they get off at the end of the ride, every single one of those people wears the biggest and the brightest smile I've ever seen."



## and Their Carousels

### Herschell-Spillman Traveling Style: *Herschell-Spillman Company*

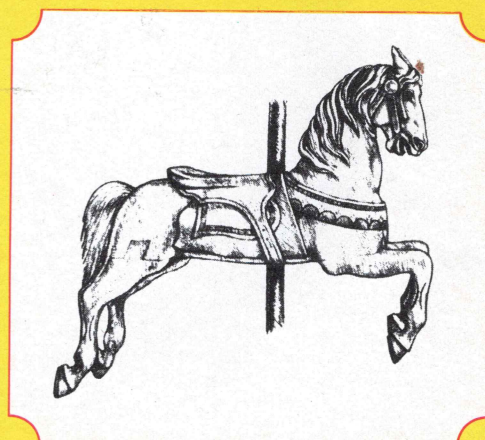
The Herschell-Spillman horse, top right, was carved in a simple, direct style and boxy shape. Its lack of trappings or jewels made it inexpensive and therefore popular with fairground and carnival carousel operators.

### Country Fair Style: *C. W. Parker Company*

The dramatic stylized horses of the C. W. Parker Company of Abilene, Kansas, lower right, are perhaps the easiest to recognize. With their legs and neck extended as if in flight from a pursuer, the horses not only lent drama to a carousel but were easily stored—an asset because they were frequently part of traveling amusement shows. The Parker Company's horses were often decorated with Wild West Americana such as crossed American flags, six-shooters, and metal horseshoes inscribed with the name of company owner Charles Parker.

### CAROUSEL ROUNDUP

APPROXIMATELY THREE HUNDRED CAROUSELS with hand-carved animals still operate today. The locations of some of them follow. **Dentzel Company:** Knot's Berry Farm, Buena Park, California; State Fair Park, Dallas, Texas. **Charles Looff Company:** Exposition Park Grounds, Spokane, Washington; Salem Willows Park, Salem Willows, Massachusetts. **Herschell-Spillman Company:** Greenfield Village, Dearborn, Michigan; Balboa Park, San Diego, California. **C. W. Parker Company:** Jantzen Beach Center, Portland, Oregon; Dickenson County Historical Society, Abilene, Kansas. **D. C. Muller & Brothers:** Cedar Point Amusement Park, Sandusky, Ohio. **Stein and Goldstein:** Central Park, New York, New York; Bushnell Memorial Park, Stamford, Connecticut. **Philadelphia Toboggan Company:** Elitch's Gardens, Denver, Colorado; Marriott's Great America, Santa Clara, California; Casino Park, Asbury Park, New Jersey. **Marcus Charles Ilions:** Barnum City Circus World, Orlando, Florida. For more information about carousel history and carving styles, consult *The American Carousel*, by Nina Fraley, available for \$5.50 postpaid from Redbug Workshop, 3024 Ashby Avenue, Berkeley, California 94705.



Herschell-Spillman Style

Country Fair Style

