





Phantom Ponies

Atlanta's Historic Carousel Finds New Life on Chattanooga's Riverfront

BY HILDA J. BRUCKER

"ANYONE CAN carve a carousel horse," Bud Ellis tells people. The statement sounds enormously optimistic, even far-fetched, until you visit Horsin' Around, Ellis' one-of-a-kind carousel carving school in Soddy Daisy, Tenn. In that sawdust-scented workroom, you'll find carousel animals in every stage of completion, from flat, rough-cut profiles to lifelike, gallant steeds. Students work patiently at chipping away wood to slowly reveal the three-dimensional animal within; they toil at the endless sanding, painting, embellishing and gilding. Through it all, Ellis is there, offering encouragement and pointing out spots where the carver should "take it down just a little more." When mistakes occur, Ellis patiently demonstrates how to reshape the part with some wood putty or another block of wood.

Though Ellis is a talented carver and an accomplished artist himself, it's his ability to inspire others and impart his

knowledge that really stands out. And it was largely these prodigious teaching skills that brought his fondest dream to life. For years, Ellis had obsessed over the idea of restoring an antique carousel as a gift to the people of Chattanooga. In 1989, he discovered Atlanta's old Grant Park carousel moldering in a warehouse. None of the original animals remained, but at least the platform and the mechanical parts of the carousel were there. After arranging to buy the remnants of the carousel, Ellis began training a small army of volunteer carvers. Though it took 10 years to completely restore the old carousel, he and his students managed to create the menagerie of animals that now spins merrily to the sound of organ music on the banks of the Tennessee River.

THE MAGICAL MENAGERIE

The merry-go-round had its heyday, appropriately enough, during the



PHOTO COURTESY OF CHATTANOOGA AREA CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU

Chattanooga's Coolidge Park

Gilded Age. From 1890 to World War I, dozens of American manufacturers turned out first steam-driven and then electrically powered carousels. As the growing middle class sought ways to fill its leisure time, carousels became popular attractions in parks around the country. Children and grown-ups alike were enchanted with this new experience of music, motion, glitz and fantasy.

Atlanta's Grant Park carousel was created in 1895 in the Philadelphia factory of Gustav Dentzel. One of the first and most famous of the master carvers, Dentzel was known for his elegant animals and the intricacy of their trappings. Today, an original Dentzel carousel figure can bring \$50,000 or more at auction. Though the original venue of the Grant Park carousel is unknown, records show that it was renovated in 1910 to include electric lights and a crank mechanism that made the animals move up and down. It then operated in parks in New Bedford, Mass. and Rochester, N.Y. before coming to Atlanta.

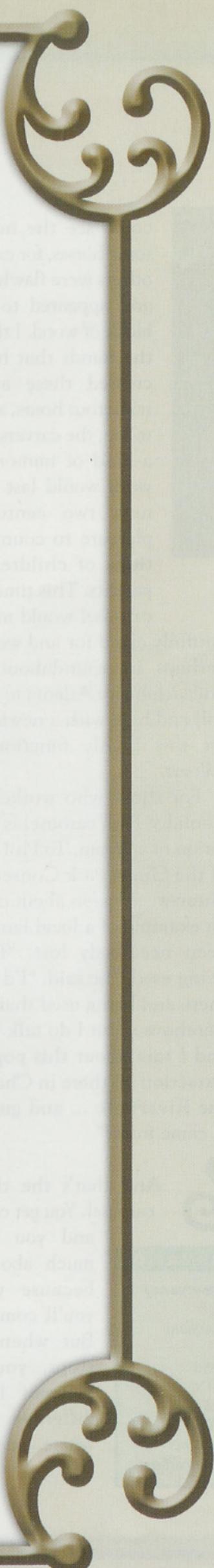
From 1966 to 1978, the carousel ran in Grant Park, one of Atlanta's largest green spaces and the oldest surviving city park today. It was unusual in that it was a "menagerie" carousel, featuring all manner of exotic creatures beside the more traditional horses, as well as upholstered chariots for those wanting a more sedate ride. But by the late '70s, the carousel was in need of maintenance and the city decided to remove

it rather than repair it. The animals were auctioned off to antique collectors and the workings put into storage.

Today, the Grant Park carousel seems to have largely disappeared from Atlanta's collective memory. Even longtime residents of the south side have trouble bringing it to mind when asked about it. Phil Cuthbertson, executive director of the Grant Park Conservancy, is acutely aware of the carousel's phantom status. He has a strong interest in the park's history and notes that while people share their memories of the park with him all the time, he rarely hears anyone reminisce about the carousel. He's uncertain of where it actually stood or what it looked like. "Strangely enough, we haven't seen any old postcards of the carousel," he said. "It seems like I would remember it, but I don't, and I know I visited the park as a child. Maybe it's just been gone so long."

CARVING A DREAM

On a summer day in 1999, the old Grant Park carousel commenced its second life, operating in a glass-enclosed pavilion in Chattanooga's Coolidge Park. Once again, it's a menagerie carousel, outfitted with a parade of fanciful creatures: ostriches, tigers, giraffes, camels, rabbits, zebras, cats, bears, and of course, horses. There are 52 animals in total, all hand-carved by volunteers under the tutelage of Ellis.



Among the volunteer carvers were a handful of north Georgians. Linda and Glenn Anton commuted to Chattanooga from their home in Canton for two-and-a-half years, working on the Arabian horse they named Midnight. The couple originally intended to keep their first carving for themselves, until Ellis approached them about donating it to the restoration. "I didn't feel a moment's hesitation," said Linda, who has fond childhood memories of riding the carousel in Griffith Park in Los Angeles. "It's an honor to have our carving on that machine. It's living art, and how many people get to do that?"

Though neither Linda nor Glenn had ever worked in wood before, they took to it quickly and credit Ellis for patiently encouraging them and the other carvers through the project. "He says that anyone can carve a carousel animal," Linda said. "And that's how Bud sees the world. He sees impossible things coming true. He doesn't see obstacles; he sees possibilities. [The restoration] wouldn't have happened with an ordinary person in charge."

Many of the carvers involved in the restoration broke from tradition by personalizing their work, something the master carvers of the last century never did. The Antons have their initials on Midnight's bridle and their names and the date on the bottom of a hoof. "Some of us put time capsules inside our animals," Glenn remembered. "And we have one inside Midnight." (The bodies of carousel figures are always hollow because of weight considerations.) The time capsule included photos of the work in progress and essays Linda had written about the experience. In addition, Glenn underwent a heart transplant while the project was in progress; jeweled hearts on the horse's trappings are a memorial to his donor. Every animal on the carousel also has a brass plaque at its base, crediting the artisan that created it.

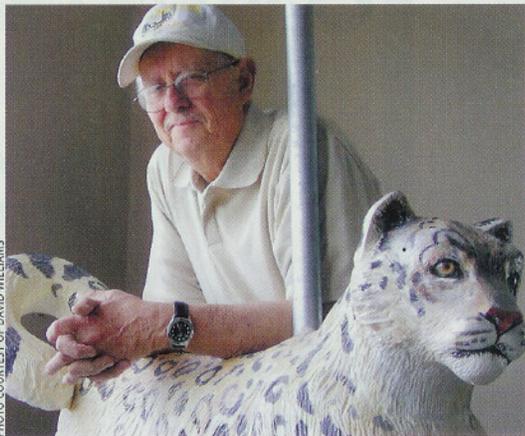


PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVID WILLIAMS

Bud Ellis operates a carousel carving school in Tennessee.

COLORFUL CREATURES

During my first visit to Coolidge Park, I circled the entire carousel before choosing a regal tiger to ride. When the carousel started, however, I found I was on a stationary animal. I quickly moved over one row, right into the saddle of a frolicking goat with curved horns. For my second ride, I had my eye on a black-and-white house cat that I later learned had been carved by Marietta resident Pat Sharp, but an eager child beat me to it. Instead, I climbed on the back of a giant green frog, clad in a yellow jacket, khaki pants and argyle socks. My third ride was on a painstakingly painted fish with shimmering iridescent scales in shades of purple and teal, the contribution of Bill Murphy from Ringgold, Ga. A gold fin formed a saddle and immediately behind it were the cherubic faces of the artist's two children.

As I rode, that morning's visit to Ellis' workshop still fresh in my mind, I found myself taking in even the smallest details on the animals around me. On some, the work was a little less practiced than others. I

could see the neck seam on some horses, for example, while others were flawlessly finished and appeared to be a single block of wood. I thought about the hands that had patiently created these animals over numerous hours, and it seemed to me, the carvers had attained a kind of immortality. Their work would last through the next two centuries, giving pleasure to countless generations of children and their parents. This time around, the carousel would most likely be

dutifully cared for and well preserved; perhaps its roundabout path from Philadelphia to Atlanta to Chattanooga will end here with a newfound respect for this highly functional form of folk art.

For those who worked on it, the Coolidge Park carousel is the manifestation of a dream. To Phil Cuthbertson of the Grant Park Conservancy, it's a bittersweet lesson about conservation, an example of a local landmark that's been needlessly lost. "I'm glad it's being used," he said. "I'd rather see it there and being used than sitting in a warehouse. But I do talk with people, and I talk about this popular tourist attraction up there in Chattanooga on the Riverwalk ... and guess where it came from?"

And that's the thing with a carousel. You get on in one spot and you don't think much about the ride, because you assume you'll come full circle. But when the music stops, you may find yourself in a whole different place from where you started. ■



FOR MORE INFORMATION

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