

KNOEBELS

# Grand Carousel

100-year-old park gem receives a makeover

BY KRISTIN BAVER

**O**NE HUNDRED YEARS of being well loved had taken its toll on the Grand Carousel at Knoebels Amusement Resort, the timeless, tree-lined family park located in Elysburg, Northumberland County.

It's not that the carousel had been neglected. Over the years, the ride's 63 hand-carved wooden steeds had been carefully, systematically removed and refurbished in a rotation that guaranteed each horse a facelift every few years.

The brass ring machine, one of only a handful still in operation, was also maintained. But the rest of the setting—the metal and canvas panels painted with bright cartoons and graphic western scenes and the intricate web of scrollwork and stenciling that spans above the heads of riders—had been left to the ravages of time, untouched for decades. In 2010, a father-and-son team set out to change all that with a massive three-year restoration to breathe new life into this treasured ride.

## *Meet the Wynns*

**WORK IN AN** old-time amusement park long enough, and you are sure to become a jack of all trades. That's what happened to David Wynn, who started his career

Because it is a free-admission park (the museum is also free), a visitor to Knoebels can take a ride on the historic carousel for just \$1.50, and the rider could also win a free ride by plucking a brass ring from its operating ring machine.



Knoebels carousel museum houses retired carousel animals including a regal lion and prancing ostrich on a faux carousel. Many of the original Wolfinger panels are also displayed there.

at Knoebels in 1972 as a maintenance worker. Over the years, he also became the carousel's primary caretaker, a man trusted to keep the intricate antique organs that pump out the tinny music in top working order.

In 2010, Wynn's son, Matt, had recently graduated from Bloomsburg University with an art degree and was struggling to find work in his field. Knowing that the carousel was coming up on its centennial in 2013 and was in need of some careful attention, Knoebels enlisted the younger Wynn as a restoration technician for the ride. With no formal training to help him translate his artistic background to the meticulous work of restoration, Matt learned by the trial and error of hands-on experience.

"Did you know that I was a wood carver?" he jokes. "Neither did I."

Matt's methodical work over the next three years would help to shed new light on the ride's rich history and uncover

some of the only surviving documentation of its age and origins.

From the earliest beginnings of the park, now operated by the third generation of the Knoebel family, Knoebels has always had a carousel. In the early 1900s, Henry Knoebel and his wife, Hattie, were in the farming and lumber business when they were commissioned to build a cottage at nearby Lithia Springs, where a makeshift amusement park sprang up each season.

"Henry hated farming," Dick Knoebel says of his grandfather, and that first glimpse of a modest entertainment resort gave him an idea.

In those days, carousels were not fixtures, so Henry convinced the ride's owner, Joe Gallagher, to bring the traveling merry-go-round to a new location the following year. Knoebels debuted July 4, 1926, with a carousel, a pool and an eatery. The park proved successful, and within 15 years, the family was eager to purchase its own carousel.

### History Rewritten

THE GRAND CAROUSEL that has stood in the park for nearly 75 of its 100-year

existence, was first assembled in 1913 at Gala Park in the North Beach area of Queens, N. Y., by George Kremer, who produced at least six different carousels over his lifetime. The only other Kremer carousel still in operation today is located in St. Catherine's in Ontario, Canada.

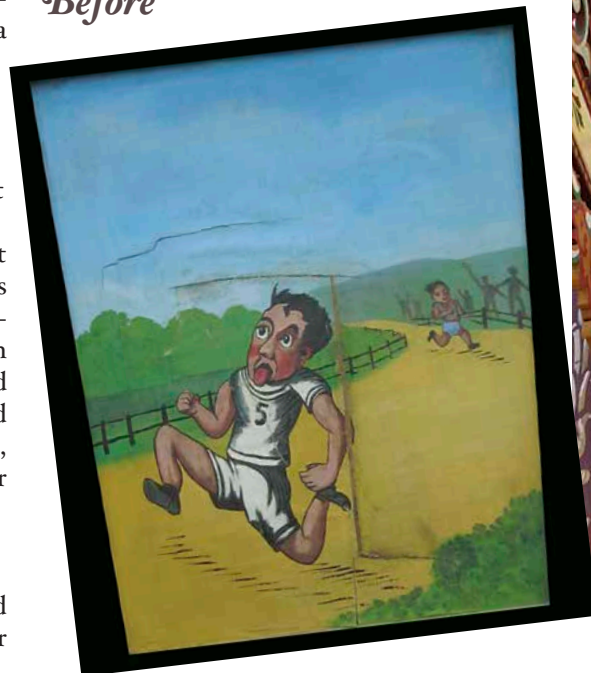
Prohibition took a toll on North Beach Park, the site today of LaGuardia Airport, and it was thought that the carousel was eventually relocated to Riverside Park in Rahway, N.J., although it is unclear if the ride was ever operational at its new home.

"No one ever remembers a carousel being there," the elder Wynn says.

A chance discovery solved that particular mystery early in 2014 when workers sifting through some records in the Knoebels' homestead found a small, black metal box. Inside was the bill of sale for the carousel along with other historical documents.

Turns out that Knoebels purchased the merry-go-round, along with two organs, two motors and benches, for \$4,000 from a Charles Schmitt of Riverside Park in Piscataway, N.J., about 15 miles from Rahway. The official transaction documents were signed January 26, 1942, a date that called another piece of family lore into question. It had always been said that Henry Knoebel bought the Grand Carousel in 1941, just 10 days before Pearl Harbor. According to family legend, news

### Before



Before

### After



KRISTIN BAEVER (4)



### After

of the attack came as the Knoebels were unloading their new investment.

Park spokesman Joe Muscato believes he has an answer for that discrepancy. In those days, buying and selling was a handshake deal, and likely one finalized with a cash payment. His best guess is that the transaction, indeed, began in December 1941 and was formally completed with the written bill of sale the following month.

For the most part, the ride itself speaks for its long history. Beyond the newly discovered bill of sale, miniscule clues left behind by previous workers are "the only written records we have," Matt says.

The carved equines are a rarity themselves, with glass taxidermy eyes and real horsehair tails instead of the fully sculpted hindquarters found on most merry-go-round horses. The Grand Carousel's 63 horses consist of 36 standard steeds with three feet on the ground and one hoof raised in the air and another 27 that leap and jump with the aid of a pole and a mechanism that turns as the ride rotates. To keep the iconic horses looking just as splendid as their first day on the job, the park removes a handful of the most-worn horses each winter and refurbishes the

A Bloomsburg University graduate with an art degree, Matt Wynn—son of David Wynn, the primary caretaker of the carousel—was hired by Knoebels as a restoration technician for its carousel. He worked on all parts of the carousel, including the restoration of the rounding boards that appear on the top outside edge of the carousel (above) and the center panels (below, left) of the historic carousel.

saddles and sides that have been rubbed to bare wood grain from the endless parade of riders slinging their legs over the animals' backs.

This constant upkeep has been the key to the ride's survival, David Wynn says.

"For example, if a leg is broken, we don't just pound a few nails in," he explains. Instead, damaged limbs are carefully epoxied together, and the hardware is removed to maintain the authenticity of the original piece. A heat gun pulls the paint off in sheets, but sometimes a scalpel is employed to scrape the paint, layer by layer, in search of the original finish. Each refurbishing job takes "a couple hundred hours, if you want to do it right," Wynn says.



ROSANNE CHEESEMAN, ERIE

## Historic Wooden Carousels in Pennsylvania

**GRAND CAROUSEL,** Knoebels, Elysburg, 1913 (installed at park in 1941), brass ring machine in operation, several organs.

**DENTZEL CAROUSEL,** Please Touch Museum, Philadelphia, 1902-1907 (restored and installed in the restored Memorial Hall in Fairmount Park in 2008).

**PTC GRAND** Carousel, Peddler's Village, Lahaska, 1922 (moved to Lahaska in 1998), all but two of the figures were carved by Ed Roth of Long Beach, Calif., following styles when the carousel was new.

**PTC CAROUSEL,** Hersheypark, Hershey, 1919 (brought to Hersheypark in 1944), four-row park model.

**PTC CAROUSEL,** Idlewild Park, Ligonier, 1930 (last to be made by PTC, moved to Idlewild in 1931), all-solid wood horses.

**DENTZEL CAROUSEL,** Weona Park, Pen Argyl, 1900 (arrived in Pen Argyl in 1923), operating brass ring machine, in a community park.

**DENTZEL CAROUSEL,** Kennywood Park, Pittsburgh, 1927 (originally built for Sesquicentennial Exposition in Philadelphia but wasn't

finished in time; arrived at Kennywood, via the Pennsylvania Railroad, in 1927), four-row park model.

**SPILLMAN CAROUSEL,** DelGrosso's Amusement Park, Tipton, 1924, portable three-row model, all-wood carousel still in original location.

**CAROUSEL, ALBION** Boro Park, Albion, 1890-1900 (arrived at Albion in 1947), one of the oldest operating carousels, all but one chariot is original.

**CLASSIC WOOD** Carousel, Millville Community Park, Millville, 1920s (arrived in 1940), only

**MULLER/HARTON** Carousel, Conneaut Lake Park, Conneaut Lake, 1905, although the park has had financial challenges, it will open for the 2015 season.

operated on week of July 4 every year by Millville Fire Company.

**DENTZEL CAROUSEL,** Dorney Park and Wildwater Kingdom, Allentown, 1921 (at Dorney since 1995, formerly at Cedar Point, Ohio), four-row park model.

**DID WE** miss one or two? Please write and let us know.

## Coney Island's Michelangelo

**TO RESTORE THE** other parts of the ride, Matt Wynn spent hours painstakingly detailing the work, from matching the oil-based paint colors to copying every brushstroke. The ornately carved and stenciled sweeps remained in place while Matt craned his neck to hand paint the

detailed and unique blocks, works of art unto their own. He relied on old photos and faded work to retrace the original artist's brush strokes on even the most basic ride elements.

"Every stroke is intended to be exactly like the one before it," Matt says of his attention to detail. Progressing in this slow, meticulous fashion was the only way to rejuvenate the work without completely

losing the original spirit.

Five of the 18 original metal rounding boards, illustrations decorating the perimeter of the carousel's canopy, bear the signature of August Wolfinger, a German immigrant and Coney Island banner painter.

"These paintings contain the only tangible proof we have of the carousel's 100-year existence," Matt says. The sig-

natures and year 1913 also provide the only evidence as to the artist behind the works decorating the carousel, since the 36 center panels at the ride's core bear no such proof.

The two sets of paintings were mismatched in style and content at the outset of the ride's construction.

The smaller panels at the ride's core are brightly colored scenes portraying the humor of a bygone era with subtle puns and cartoonish wordplay, while the exterior panels were rife with graphic depictions of violence on the western plains.

"The original rounding boards were kind of gruesome," Muscato notes.

Matt speculates that despite the contrasting styles, Wolfinger may have been behind all 54 individual works. The comical style of the center panels more closely matches the rest of the scenic artist's known works.

"As to why the rounding boards would have been rendered more realistically, we can only speculate," Matt says, suggesting the incongruity may simply be attributed to a painter-for-hire following the orders of his benefactor.

About 10 years after the carousel had become established at Knoebels, park officials noticed that the original rounding boards were badly rusting, so in 1953 Frank Meisel, the park's full time painter until around 1980, rejuvenated what was then already faded and worn workmanship on the rounding boards, and then the center panels the next year. Rather than risk offending guests in the conservative 1950s with the gory scenes or tackling what would be a recurring problem, Knoebels also tasked Meisel with creating durable masonite panels with new scenes that would cover and preserve the original artwork while better matching the ride's other panels. The original more realistic panels remained hidden until 1977, when Meisel was asked to remove the panels to retouch the paint.

"The original boards went unseen, but were not forgotten," Matt says. In fact, park employees photographed the original works before rehangng them once more with Meisel's works forming a protective barrier. Wolfinger's originals wouldn't be uncovered again until 2011 when the Wynns began their restoration.

## Staying True to Wolfinger

**TO WORK ON** the 36 center panels, Matt removed the pieces for individual refurbishment, a tedious job allowing him to

*In early 2014, workers sifting through some records in the Knoebels' homestead found a small, black metal box. Inside was the bill of sale for the carousel along with other historical documents.*

finish at the rate of about one panel per week. He carefully replaced the cardboard backing with plywood to make the panels more durable and patched ring-shaped holes with canvas. Some of the panels were so far gone, however, they had to be glued onto all new backdrops.

"They probably anticipated this would last 20 years at the most," Matt speculates.

The rounding boards posed their own dilemma during the Wynn restoration. Despite years of being shielded by the updated Meisel works, the original metal panels were still badly damaged, leaving the antique and historically significant pieces faded and pocked with rust.

Matt chose the signed Wolfinger panels and one other badly rusted scene to be restored and displayed at the park's carousel museum as a tribute to the relics of the fine craftsmanship of yesteryear. Throughout the restoration process, Matt says he gradually went from being curious about the original works to needing to see them for himself before finally resolving to build a mechanism for the carousel museum that would allow park patrons to also enjoy the original scenes and stencils, which were intact under years and layers of paint. The display includes several fabricated pieces that Matt created in the style of the period, some based on Wolfinger's paintings that remain in place on the carousel but hidden behind Meisel's works.

Matt used his knowledge of art history to track down some of the original reference paintings that Wolfinger used as inspiration on the exterior rounding boards. On one, a dog holds a child in its front paws, an image based on the 1856 painting "Saved" by Sir Edwin Landseer, a British painter known for his works of animals. Many of the original carousel paintings were based on the works of Frederic Remington, an artist who specialized in depictions of the old American West.

Matt's earliest attempts were filled

with guesses and tests about how best to restore the work without disturbing its integrity. Then he received word that someone had shown his restoration work to Wolfinger's grandson, who had shed tears of joy when he saw the photos. Having the approval of the artist's descendant allayed any of Matt's remaining fears.

For the most jarringly violent and most badly damaged panels, Matt created a few replacement rounding boards by matching the size and style down to the exact gauge of metal. The originals are now on display at the park's carousel museum, which pays homage to the history of the carousel with a menagerie of retired carousel animals, including a regal lion, a prancing ostrich and a large rooster, depicted on a faux carousel.

The Wynns' restoration project has lasted more than three years, with the bulk of the work completed in time for the carousel's centennial celebration in 2013. But with a project of this magnitude involving a ride popular with thousands of sometimes rambunctious patrons, the work is truly never ending.

When the last stroke is completed, some of the earliest refurbished sections will need to be retouched. It's a perpetual cycle familiar to caretakers of other large and complicated pieces.

"It's like painting the Golden Gate Bridge," Matt says. "You start. When you're done, you have to touch up again." 🐾

—Kristin Baver writes from Bloomsburg.

## When You Go

The **Grand Carousel** is located in the center of Knoebels Amusement Resort in Elysburg, Northumberland County. It costs \$1.50 to ride the carousel. Knoebels Carousel Museum, also located in the park, provides a history of the carousel in America and offers examples of the work of all the major carousel carvers. Knoebels is open on weekends in May and begins its daily summer schedule May 20. It remains open daily through Labor Day with weekend hours extending through September. Knoebels doesn't charge an admission fee; ride tickets are available for purchase. [knoebels.com](http://knoebels.com)