



Oregon's Carousels - Past, Present, and Future

by Larry Wade, with Mark Reed
version of Dec 30, 2022

By one report, 6,000 carousels have been built in the U.S. and Europe, but only 180 survive today. Five are operational in Oregon and two are being restored. The largest collection of carousel animals and mechanisms in the world is housed in Hood River. At one time, Portland had the most carousels per capita in the U.S.

Today, Salem and Albany both have world-class, community-carved carousels with dedicated carving and painting studios. As carvers, we stand in awe at the art and craft required to create, paint, or restore each animal. As citizens, we laud the volunteers who make and operate these creations. As parents, we appreciate seeing children's joy provided by these beautiful, complex machines.

This article's purpose is to honor all the carvers, painters, volunteers, and leaders who have worked on Oregon's carousels. I encourage readers to tour the carving and painting studios in Salem and Albany and see the current Jantzen Beach Carousel exhibition at the Oregon Historical Society ([click here](#)). I hope to inspire volunteers to carve, paint, or restore a carousel animal. We're going to showcase a restored carousel horse at our Gathering of the Guilds booth in April. Maybe you'll appreciate it even more when you see it.



Albany Menagerie Carousel



Salem Horse Carousel

Carousels can be small, large, mobile, or stationary. Animals are made from wood, aluminum, fiberglass, or a mixture. Some animals move, some are stationary, some carousels only have horses, and some have a menagerie. American carousels rotate counterclockwise, English carousels rotate clockwise. Most are housed in buildings; all have music. Some are run by volunteers, some are commercial. Animals usually have a fancy side facing out and a plainer side facing the center. They are for kids of all ages.

Carousel animals are big, really big. Those made from wood can take four years to carve, a year to paint, and weigh 200-400 hundred pounds. The Salem Carousel workers carved 42 animals and plan to carve 30 more for completion, special events, and maintenance. The Albany Carousel has an equally challenging project. Each carousel had over 80,000 volunteer hours so far. These are huge community projects.

The famous 1921 carousel at Portland's Jantzen Beach Mall was mothballed in 2012 along with its 82 carved antique horses. The non-profit Restore Oregon now owns the "herd" and mechanics, and they plan to restore everything to its original glory. These antique horses require significant restoration from use, abuse, and questionable repairs over the last century.



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The Jantzen Beach carousel will join the existing Portland carousels at Oaks Park and Clackamas, as well as the one in Seaside.

Another restoration is underway in Cottage Grove. Long-time residents remember the former ones at the World Forestry Center, Portland waterfront, and Blue Lake.

Much of this information came from an interview with Mark Reed. Mark is a retired executive at the World Forestry Center who worked intimately with our predecessor carving club that was sponsored by the Center for nearly three decades. He has a wealth of first-hand carousel history and restores carousel musical band organs himself. Additional information comes from Stephanie Brown, the project leader of the Jantzen Beach Carousel (JBC), site visits to Salem and Albany, and online and public information.



Jantzen Beach Sister Carousel in British Columbia

The Perrons—Early Patrons

From Mark Reed,

Duane and Carol Perron of Portland were the driving force in the early days of carousel restorations around here. Duane passed away in 2018 (obit here), and Carol is in assisted living and no longer involved. Their two sons, Carl and Brad, used to run the carousel at the Forestry Center when they were kids, and they hated it. They really wanted to be doing other things. Carl became an architect in the Hood River area and has since passed away. Brad is still running the family businesses, including Historic Carousels Inc, which owns the huge carousel collection and related mechanisms along with a couple of band organs. They operate carousels at Clackamas Town Center, San Diego, and Long Beach, CA.

From the Duane Perron obituary: "In the early 1970s, concerned that the magnificent hand-carved carousels of the late 1800s and early 1900s were heading towards extinction, Duane and Carol embarked on what became a lifelong passion, collecting over a thousand carousel animals for future restoration. Through their devoted commitment to this work, they gathered the largest and most comprehensive collection of carousel horses in the world, representing all the major carvers and carousel builders."

The Perrons created the non-profit [International Museum of Carousel Art](#) in Hood River, which was preceded by the Portland Carousel Museum at the Willamette Center. Both are now closed, and the artifacts remain in storage. Mark Reed commented,

The plan was to use a building further up the valley in Dee near Hood River and make that into a museum. It was a large building left over from a big lumber mill that burned, but a building that was separate and not damaged. It was like 100 feet wide by 900 feet long with a railroad track running into it. It was a huge building with carousel mechanisms and parts stored there. A heavy snow in March 2017 collapsed the roof and dumped not only the structure of the roof but also about three feet of snow onto all the things below. Luckily, no carousel animals were there, but a lot of the mechanisms, scenery, and other things were badly damaged; and they're still recovering from that.

Duane's intent was always to create a large museum there which would have two or three operating carousels, show off their collection of over 1,000 animals, and make it a focal point for doing restoration on carousels to get them up and operating. This dream all started out with Carol just wanting one carousel horse. Initially, Duane had



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no interest, but every time she kept bringing it up the price had gone up, and he started to figure out that there was a potential investment here. They ended up buying a few carousel horses and eventually, entire carousels. Brad still wishes to build the museum and carousel facility, but faces great difficulties with zoning restrictions.

The Forestry Center Carousel

Mark continued,

Because he was a Vice President at US Bank, Duane got a call from First National Bank. They had a bad debt [on the books] for a shopping center project that included a large carousel stored somewhere in the basement of a Portland commercial building. They wanted to get rid of this thing, and they knew this guy at US Bank might be interested. The bank sold it to Duane for a bargain price and financed it too. This was a large carousel carved by Loeff and had a lion, elephants, and giraffes as well as other animals. Hidden with the carousel was a Wurlitzer Band organ.

Not too long after, they had a chance to buy another carousel. This was a 1914 four-abreast carousel manufactured by The Mangles Company with lions, camels, and horses originally not designed to move. The owners modified it to travel and leased it to an East coast amusement company.

It was not owned by an amusement company but by a couple. The husband was shot and killed in a robbery at an amusement park. His wife ended up with it and eventually sold it to Duane and Carol Perron. They flew back to Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania and put the two semi-trailers on railroad flat cars to ship to Oregon. The purchase included a ton and a half truck pulling the center pole machinery. They drove it back to Hood River averaging 28 miles an hour. The trailer was extremely heavy. The truck had a very small fuel tank and no radio, so it was a long, exciting trip.

This is the carousel that was restored and installed at the Forestry Center. It had been operating and was complete, but the railroad trip had damaged the animals in the trailers pretty badly. Steel racks built for the horses to sit on were broken by the abrupt starting, stopping, and coupling of the train cars.

A group of three horses on a rack fell to the front of the trailer and just sat there wearing holes in the wood wall at the front of the trailer where the noses and legs hit it. There was a lot of damage. It was this carousel that some of the Western Woodcarvers members started assisting with repairs.

The Portland Waterfront Carousel

Mark went on,

They were involved with other carousel projects. Soon after that they made a deal to put a carousel in the Willamette Center at the PGE headquarters at the corner of SW 1st and Salmon Street. They had a mechanism and enough horses to put one together, all carved by the Charles Loeff Company, but not all from the same original carousel.



Salem Horse Construction



Salem Horse Carving



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They started a huge local project asking for volunteer individuals or couples to adopt an animal to strip, repair, and refinish. The carousel opened in 1982 when the National Carousel Association had their annual meeting in Portland. That carousel operated for the very first time in front of that convention. Everybody who'd restored an animal was riding it, and it was the first time the machine ran with a load in front of everybody. Luckily it worked just fine.

That was a huge project. It stayed at the Willamette Center along with the first carousel museum. There were a handful of carvers from the Western Woodcarvers Association who became almost full-time volunteers on that project. The two club members I remember most were Terry Cosgrove and Roger Sogge. Terry worked for the Portland Terminal Railroad and switched railroad cars to build up trains while sitting in his tower. He could carve there for fun when he wasn't busy. That carousel today is operating in Southern California. It was at the Willamette Center several years until they decided they no longer wanted it to be a public space. They made it into a professional office space that became the World Trade Center.

Back Stories

Pacific Gas and Electric [PGE] had been great helping us restore it, and there are some interesting back-stories. They gave us space in a substation near SE 60th and Stark where we worked on all the animals. It was a big brick building with a lot of empty space. That's where I was the Sunday morning when Mount St. Helens blew. The animals were covered with blankets when we weren't working on them. PGE had one key that opened all the buildings, all the padlocks, everything; and we had a copy. Carol Perron came in there one day and saw this guy with no clothes on running around the corner out of sight. Apparently, there were two guys and a gal all quite naked, and they had taken some of the blankets and put them on the floor. And so it was, interesting. As Carol said, "Well, I couldn't think of what to say other than, 'What are you doing?'"

Another time there was a section of the building with big control panels that were still in use, a part of their remote-control system, because there was still a big, functional substation right behind this building. We were hauling some long pieces in once and had to go through that area. Duane backed up into one of those panels and turned off Gresham. Of course, there was a phone there, but it never rang before. You could call out on the phone, but nobody ever called in. The PGE load dispatcher did call in, so Carol picked up the phone and the guy at the other end says, 'Who's this?' And of course, Carol goes, 'Well, who's this?' And it was like minutes before some PGE people showed up. The next day there was a big plywood wall built around their equipment.



Albany Paint Shop, Typical of All Restorations

Members of the Western Woodcarvers were restoring and repairing pieces. A wonderful Loeff carousel sea dragon was rescued from a fun-house but the saddle had been carved off. So, Roger Sogge built the wood back up, carved the saddle the way it was originally and did beautiful work. He made his living doing carving and woodworking, primarily for churches, and was very good making detailed, accurate, beautiful carvings. He also had a small foundry at his property towards Gresham, and he cast parts and gears and things for us out of brass and aluminum and worked a lot on the mechanical side of the carousels too.



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Early Carousel History

Mark continued,

Carousels were an early amusement ride. They started out in Europe. The very first ones were hand pushed to train young knights how to spear things. You get on your little fake horse, which might just be a chunk of a log hanging there, and you'd hold your spear and people would push you around a circle as you try to spear a little ring. Well, it became very popular as a kiddie ride. And then they got a little bit larger and more elaborate. When steam power became available in the late 1800s, they became quite large, and amusement settings in Europe became big. But it really took off in the United States because we had a better economy.

The phenomenon that built amusement parks in the United States were the trolley and streetcar companies with lines around urban areas. On weekends they had no business, so they would buy property at the end of their lines and build a park. It might just be a picnic park, but it would have amusement rides over time. If you want to find advertisements for carousels, go to trade journals for streetcar companies.

Oaks Park was what they call a trolley park and was built that way. There was one at the top of Council Crest as well with a carousel and observation tower, both long gone. You'd have both the small portable ones that would go with traveling carnivals and the big, fancy ornate ones that were designed to stay fixed in an amusement park.

There were several carousel manufacturing companies. A lot of the carvers were born in Europe and came over here because the economy was better. They might have been the furniture makers there, but they somehow landed jobs here carving wooden animals, a lot of them around Coney Island. Dentzel was a big company in Philadelphia, Parker was a huge company in Kansas, and there was even one in California. You had your little cheap models, and you had your great big elaborate ones too. They were big in the 1920s. If you look at pictures from then, adults were riding; and they were not considered a kids ride, it was an adult thing.

When the depression hit, parks would go under, and the carousels would become available to purchase so you could get a used rather than a new one. They also started using pantographs to carve animals and they started casting animals out of aluminum after World War I. Over time they became more of a carnival and children's ride type thing. Where they have a stable home, they are very popular and some of the success stories like the carousels in Salem and Albany have a public following. It is a great family activity. The music, lights, motion, and the carvings all make a wonderful package.

I personally got involved because of the band organs and the music. I started working on theater pipe organs and still do. I've got a Wurlitzer military band organ from a carousel in my home, and I'm looking at another one to acquire.

When I asked Mark what he thought Brad Perron's vision is with his collection, Mark replied,

I would say he is still hoping to create a museum facility. The building that collapsed had insurance and has been rebuilt in a much nicer form. It's a bit smaller, but it's quite a nice building located within a few feet of the Mount Hood Railroad track. There's some desire to have a railroad tourist destination where you would come up to also see the museum with one or more carousels. He has space and apparently the structural steel to do some outlying carousel buildings as well. So that's the dream, but it's a lot of work. How soon it's going to happen, I don't know. It's in Dee, a little before you get to Parkdale.



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A bit about the Jantzen Beach Carousel

I asked Mark if he was aware of any carousel projects around the Portland area. Mark answered,

The Jantzen Beach carousel that was in storage was donated to the historical preservation group called Restore Oregon. They usually act as project facilitators, but now they own the carousel, and plan to find a permanent home for it in the Portland area, once the horses and infrastructure are fully restored—a many-year project.

Carousel locations are very hard to find. For a long time, shopping centers were great because they visually were a centerpiece, a sort of a bribe for kids—"be nice while I shop for shoes, and you can ride the carousel." But current shopping centers are into renting square footage, and they figured out little kiosks selling cell phones and makeup could rent every square foot. A carousel takes up a lot of room and cannot pay the kind of rent they want, plus shopping centers are having other problems.

You look at where you can put these things. The Perrons have one in California in a city park, and they've had a huge problem with the homeless and vandalism, so families, your big market, don't feel comfortable going there. The carousels themselves are 100 plus years old, and you just can't put them out in the weather. They need to be in a protected building. I think Salem and Albany have a winning formula. They are in a small enough area with little competition from big-name amusement entertainment nearby, and they become kind of the big show in town and can draw a lot of volunteers. Salem and Albany have done well with beautiful hand-carved and hand-painted animals. I'd like to think this is going to be a trend.

I've suggested to the Perrons that it would be good to take some of their complete carousels and provide a complete operating carousel to a city that has a museum element. Then you have a space where it talks about the history, so visitors get an appreciation that this isn't just a cheesy amusement ride. You're riding on a piece of art over a century old with a lot of history. How many times can you find something with history and artistic value that you can sit on and interact with in a physical way? I think there's just a lot of value to that. It's such a wonderfully simple thing. Spokane has a carousel that they're very proud of. And they have a brass ring machine on it, and you can actually spear.

You need a dedicated building in a location that has traffic with a commercial use. At one point the Children's Museum near the Zoo was in line to get the Jantzen Beach carousel. They looked at the cost of the building, operating costs, and potential income, and it didn't pencil out. Part of the problem is that a carousel is huge. Some are 72 feet across, so it takes a big building. I talked to them about it. Instead buying an incredibly elaborate but slightly smaller carousel, build a building and come out dollars ahead with something that would be nice [to house a large, free carousel].

The Jantzen Beach carousel is big, but they're not fancy horses. It's a Parker model, and they almost exclusively made small traveling machines. The animals are small enough for one guy to handle one when setting up and tearing down. The horses are relatively small and relatively simple.



Miniature Dentzel carousel in Albany Museum



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The Burlingame Burger King Carousel

The Perrons did another carousel in Portland—an English design—in a Burger King near the Burlingame Fred Meyer. It was kind of fun with odd animals—some bird types along with double-saddled horses with an extended back for more capacity. English carousels turn clockwise while American carousels turn counterclockwise. On the Burger King carousel, all the animals were English with their “fancy” side opposite of an American animal. The less viewed side of most carousel animals are plainer. The Perrons had an American mechanism, but the owner didn't care which way it turned. This one had badly worn gears, but it's going to turn the other direction so it's not going to hit that side of the gear anymore. They got all running, started it up, and it just ran smoothly. When they hit the stop button, the thing started to coast but the gears were all hitting the badly worn sides, and it just roared. Consequently, they had to cast new gears for it. It operated for several years, and my brother operated it for a while, but finally Burger King wanted more space and ended up moving out of that spot.”

Note: This was the end of the carousel portion of the interview with Mark, as we moved on to other historical topics. A follow-on article will provide details about the Jantzen Beach, Salem, and Albany carousels.



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References and Notes to accompany Oregon's Carousels – Past, Present, and Future.

Albany Historic Carousel and Museum (opened 2017) - <https://albanycarousel.com/>

Salem's Riverfront Carousel (opened 2001) - <https://salemcarousel.wixsite.com/salemcarousel>

Jantzen Beach Carousel project, by Restore Oregon.

Restore Oregon Portland Diamond Project <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELboq2xdkAY>

(start at minute 1:43)

For extensive video and written information see <https://restoreoregon.org/category/jantzen-beach-carousel/>

Dentzel Carousel Company (their antique mechanism used at Albany; also a patron of the museum. Now living in Port Townsend, WA <http://dentzel.weebly.com/>

Parker Carousel Museum (builder of Jantzen Beach carousel), Leavenworth, KS, <http://firstcitymuseumsilhma.com/c-w-parker-carousel-museum/>

The Jantzen Beach carousel has a duplicate operating in Vancouver BC (Burnaby), described at <https://www.burnabyvillagemuseum.ca/EN/main/visit.html>

1921 Parker 72 horse 4-row Park Machine at Jansen Beach Mall, Portland, OR

1911 Herschell-Spillman menagerie carousel at Oaks Park Amusement Park, Portland, OR

Cottage Grove is restoring a carousel and are nearly complete with the animal restoration. It is a 1929 Herschell 36-foot, 34 animal menagerie-style carousel.

“The National Carousel Association is into saving carousels, and the American Carousel Society is for collectors. And there's always a compromise between those groups.”

Historian - Darrell Jabin, Oregon's Traveling Historian, has researched carousel history, visited them throughout our state and produced a short documentary about carousels. He has shared his knowledge and interest in carousels in more than 50 presentations. Darrell was a speaker, maybe twice, at the Guild of Oregon Woodworkers, discussing the history of carousels, the different styles, and the carving process involved to create these wonderful works of art.

History of Oregon Amusement Parks, YouTube, Darrel Jabin, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApILOkg5iA0>

News article about snow collapsing the Hood River roof in 2017, [click here](#).

The Carousel Museum, Bristol, CT, <https://www.thecarouselmuseum.org/> (preservation focus)

Ken Means (parttime in Oregon, parttime near Nashville, TN) - https://www.williamsonherald.com/news/local-news/franklin-carver-ken-means-carousel-nears-completion/article_569174e6-1829-11ed-84cb-83d2cc575d9d.html

<https://www.vintagecarousels.com/carversandmanufacturersweb.htm>

<https://www.ourfaircarousel.org/history/americas-carousels/>

Brochure: NORTHWEST CAROUSEL TRAIL PASSPORT, picked up in Albany, lists carousels in OR, WA, ID, and MT.



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Video: The Story of the Albany Oregon Carousel, as seen on PBS, 1 hour, produced by Peter Daulton, 2018 (available to loan from Oregon Carvers Guild library).

Book: Salem's Riverfront Carousel by Kimber Williams (available to borrow)

DVD: Come Along for the Ride, The Story of Salem's Riverfront Carousel (eBay)

Salem: Current carving studio is 450 sq. ft., expansion plans are for "The Stables" to create a new 2,400 square foot building to house bigger carving and painting studios, among others.

WEB: The History of the Carousel, <https://www.volocars.com/blog/history-of-the-carousel>

Books: See National Carousel Association resources at <https://carousels.org/carousel-bibliography.html>

A collection of twelve miniatures, including one from the JBC, [click here](#) for PDF, the author Jerry Reinhardt published a book on carving miniatures.