

Grand Opening of Cafesjian's Carousel (PTC #33) Como Park, St. Paul

June 3, 2000, was an important date for Minnesota carousel lovers. That's when the Philadelphia Toboggan Company carousel #33, Cafesjian's Carousel (named after its benefactor, Gerard Cafesjian) celebrated its grand opening in St. Paul's Como Park. After losing its former site at the Minnesota State Fairgrounds in 1989, the 1914 carousel has traveled a bumpy road to reach its new destination just three quarters of a mile from its original home. The carousel is unique in the world because, for the 75 years it was at the state fair, it was never ridden more than 12 days per year!

The related highlight of this event was the inauguration of the Wurlitzer 153 band organ (Figure 1) which has been expertly restored over the past six years by MBSI and COAA member Mike Merrick. Joining in the festivities were members of the MBSI



Figure 1. The Wurlitzer Style 153 band organ in the center of Cafesjian's Carousel.

Snowbelt Chapter and COAA, who brought their band organs and music boxes to the park. Eight band organs were placed in nearby locations to draw visitors towards the carousel building (Figure 2). Other chapter members demonstrated their music boxes inside the neighboring turn-of-the-century completely restored horticultural conservatory.



Figure 2. Caught riding the carousel were Gina Rulli (middle) and Angelo Rulli (right).

When it was learned that the state fair board refused to extend the lease for the carousel, it was decided that it would be broken up and sold at auction. A local non-profit community organization, Our Fair Carousel, Inc., was formed to raise the necessary \$1.3 million to buy the ride in its entirety and keep it in Minnesota. A major donation of \$600,000 by local businessman Gerard Cafesjian made the purchase possible, and the carousel was named in his honor. The carousel was moved to an indoor park in downtown St. Paul, but by 1996 business had declined, and the ride was forced to close.

Because the carousel ran less than two weeks a year during the state fair, it had very little actual use. Some serious damage had occurred during a fire in 1939, when the band organ was destroyed and some of the horses as well as parts of the frame were damaged. Volunteers worked to restore the frame to its original appearance by carefully removing the paint that had been applied over the years. The scenes on the rounding boards, which had been painted after the fire, needed to be repainted, but through research, artists were able to create what is believed to be a very close replication of the originals.

A band organ was also needed, and a search was undertaken to find just the right machine. Finally one was located in Connecticut, and board member Mike Merrick traveled to Hartford to see it. It was a basket case - just barely played and had no bells or registers. But Mike could appreciate the possibilities, the organ was purchased, and Mike spent the next six years rebuilding it in his basement in his spare time. To see it and hear it today is a joy to behold.

This fully restored Wurlitzer 153 is believed to have been built in the early 1920s. The low serial number is a clue that it may have been an early import from Bruder and used by Wurlitzer as a basis for the design of the 153s. In addition, the design of the facade is of German origin. Mike often brings to many rallies the perfectly restored Artizan band organ that he co-owns with Tracy Tolzmann.

Perhaps the greatest challenge in restoring the horses was to discover the original colors that were damaged in the 1939 fire; the outside (the "romance side") of those horses had burned away all the paint.



Figure 3. Bill Nunn's original 101-key Mortier fair organ which now plays Wurlitzer 165 music. This spectacular organ has over 350 pipes and sports a Hooghuys facade.

By carefully inspecting the plain sides of the horses, they could determine with assurance how to complete the decorative trappings. A high point of the grand opening day was the unveiling of the last two restored horses. Cafesjian's Carousel is one of only two remaining

carousels with the original paint and one of only 150 antique wooden carousels remaining in this country. It is truly a treasure!

Listening to the magnificent Wurlitzer as one rode the ponies of this treasure reminded all who were there of the importance of history, and of having fun while creating yet more memories.

Francy Reitz

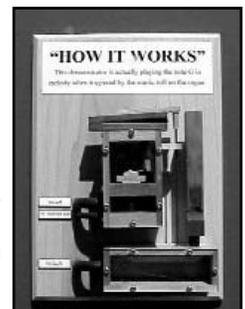


Figure 4. Tracy Tolzman and Mike Merrick have attached an excellent teaching device next to their Ruth/Artizan fairground organ showing how organ pipes play from a note on the paper roll.