

## The “Lost” Merry-Go-Round Company

Yousuf Wilson

We've all heard of and envied the discovery of nickelodeons and violanos, “art case” pianos, carousel horses, band organs, etc. etc. by ecstatic collectors. Others, including myself, have made similar and sometimes more amazing discoveries, but only in our dreams. Hey, you never know! Well, this is a story of a “new” carousel organ.

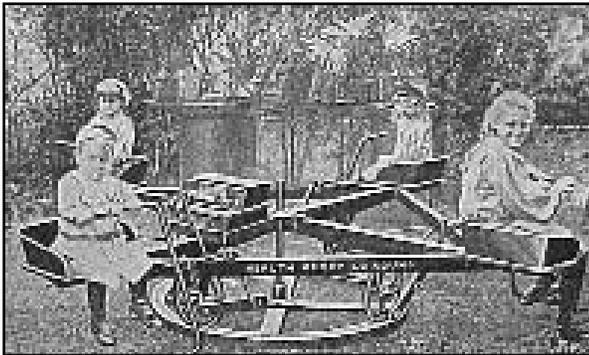


Figure 1. A feature photo in the Health Merry-Go-Round catalog show their popular four-seat model.

When returning home from a band organ rally at the Kansas State Fair put on by the Heart of America AMICA chapter, I stopped at the “Brass Armadillo” antique mall. In one aisle with hundreds of items in view, a piece of paper, half hidden, caught my eye. From ten feet away, the words “Merry-go-round” stood out. The paper turned out to be a freight export bill of lading (Figure 5) for “One (1) Health Merry-go-round and music rolls, boxed” to be shipped from Quincy, IL to the port of New York, and thence by steamer to F. M. Antunez, San Juan, Puerto Rico. The date was June 20, 1908. With my curiosity growing, I returned home with the bill of lading. Like most collectors, the history of the instruments, manufacturers, music, etc. is as intriguing as the material items themselves. By the time I got home, I was at the “have-to-know” stage, especially about the “music rolls.”

When a search of my reference books turned up nothing, I gave Ron Bopp a call. He seemed surprised and wondered why I had called him; but since he had just come out with *The American Carousel Organ* book and had obviously done extensive research, he seemed the one to contact. I was right. When researching the Smithsonian archives, Ron and wife Mary Jo came across an advertising card from the *Health Merry-Go-*



Figure 2 above reveals a six-seat Health Merry-Go-Round. Figure 3 (right) is a closeup of Figure 2 and show the roller organ in place, powered by a belt from the wheel below which traverses the round rail as the unit circles.



New Orleans, LA, Feb. 8, 1907

GENTLEMAN—In behalf of my sisters and brothers, I send this little letter to you, telling you and all that we enjoy the Health Merry-Go-Round more than words can express. When our little Friends come over they don't want to go home; all we hear is, let us have one more ride. My little brother can work it just as good as I can; he is only two and a half years old and I am eleven years old. We have all the time some of our playmates coming over to get on the Merry-Go-Round; they think that there is nothing better than the Merry-Go Round.

Will close, hoping other little children will enjoy the Merry-Go-Round as we do. We remain,

Your little friends,

VERA HAKENJOS  
LOUIS HAKENJOS  
HELEN HAKENJOS  
LEOLA HAKENJOS  
ADOLPH HAKENJOS

Figure 4. The testimonial letter accompany figure 1. Is the girl on the right (in Figure 1) Vera, the writer of the above letter?

*Round Company*. Ron informed me this was evidently a child's merry-go-round; and the organ was a cob organ. Since the gross weight of the boxed merry-go-round on the bill of lading was 986 lbs., I had already come to the conclusion this was not an ordinary size carousel.

ESTABLISHED 1841 **FREIGHT BILL**  
**AMERICAN**  
 Forwarding To and From With  
 Customs, Shipping and Banking Charges

By PL No. 4194 Contract No. \_\_\_\_\_  
 Received at Quincy, Illinois, June 20, 1906.  
 From Geo. Ertel Company.

The following property, in apparent good order, received on board (under the seal and condition of receipt of  
 bill of lading, manifest, consignment and receipt as indicated below, to be returned in the form of  
**NEW YORK** and thence by \_\_\_\_\_  
Chicago

Shipment to \_\_\_\_\_  
 to be delivered in the order and condition of receipt of  
P.M. Antunez, Calle de Corchado 2, Pinar del Rio, Porto Rico.  
 at c/o Porto Rico Express Co., San Juan, Porto Rico, the of their assigned  
 PARTIES:

One (1) Health merry-go-round and Music Rolls, Record.

MARKS, WEIGHTS OR NUMBER OF WEIGHTS.	QUANTITY	UNIT	UNIT PRICE	AMOUNT
IN FULL	986	POUNDS		

PAID BY COMPANY TO as advised by American Express Company, New York, N.Y.  
 has agreed to indemnify the **AMERICAN EXPRESS CO.** named above and  
**NOTIFY** Consignee.

Amount due through office final delivery of goods will be shown.

**CHARGES** = \_\_\_\_\_  
 amount of Consignee and Biller.

FROM	TO	CLASS	AMOUNT
Quincy	Port of San Juan	CHARGES SHIPPED IN FOR REBATE ADVICE.	
Collect amount of shippers			\$14.50 and charges
TOTAL COLLECT			

\_\_\_\_\_ not arranged for by American Express Company.

In Chicago, Illinois, this agree to the said **AMERICAN EXPRESS COMPANY**, both arranged to \_\_\_\_\_  
Chicago, Ill. 20th day of June, 1906.

Figure 5. A portion of the bill of lading for Mr. F. M. Antunez of Porto Rico. Note the listing of the “Music Rolls” along with the “Health merry-go-round.” \$14.50 freight charges for shipping 986 pounds!

Still, it was intriguing; and Quincy was only an hour and a half pleasant drive along the Mississippi. So my wife and I decided to fill in the missing facts. A stop at the Quincy Public Library and a search of their historical archives revealed that the Health Merry-Go-Round Company (Quincy, Illinois) was part of the George Ertel Manufacturing Company.

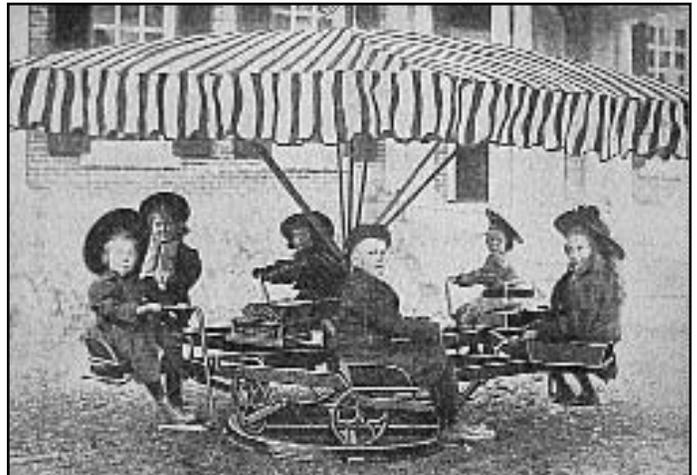


Figure 7. An example of a six-seat Health Merry-Go-Round, complete with a candy-striped canopy. Again the organ can be seen just to the left of center.

In 1902, George Ertel died, and his son, Charles, took over the business. It was Charles who introduced the Health Merry-go-round line shortly thereafter. A patent was issued May 1, 1906 (and a second, describing the organ, was issued on Jan 15, 1907—**Figures 8 & 9**) by George B. McKinney. The patent covered a well-built children's Merry-Go-Round powered by the riders pulling and pushing on a lever with hands and feet (**Figures 1-3, & 7**). The health benefits were extolled; and later doctor's testimony was presented in advertising.

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Figure 6. The organ, similar if not identical to a Gem Roller Organ, clearly carries the markings of the Health Merry-Go-Round Roller Organ.

Our next stop was the Quincy Historical Society, which was housed in a two-story building next to a historical house where tours were conducted. In the upstairs room, where there were boxes of donated items sitting about (one containing several pre 1900 revolvers), we were allowed to examine the Ertel material. A wooden box contained large (approximately 8" x 10") glass negatives of Ertel Company farm equipment and other items, evidently used in advertising. In what has to be one of the few remaining pockets of small town trust, we were allowed to handle and examine these items and cautioned only to be careful with the glass negatives.

We hit the “jackpot” when a folder of paper items contained a catalog of Health Merry-Go-Round products. The catalog listed endorsements (Figure 4), buyers, etc. of their products. It's interesting that children's health and welfare was a successful sales pitch in 1900. From a picture in the catalog, the “organ” can be identified as a Gem roller organ. (Bowers' *Encyclopedia of Automatic Musical Instruments*, Page 754). The organ crank was replaced by a pulley and connected by belt to one of the wheels (Figures 6 & 9).

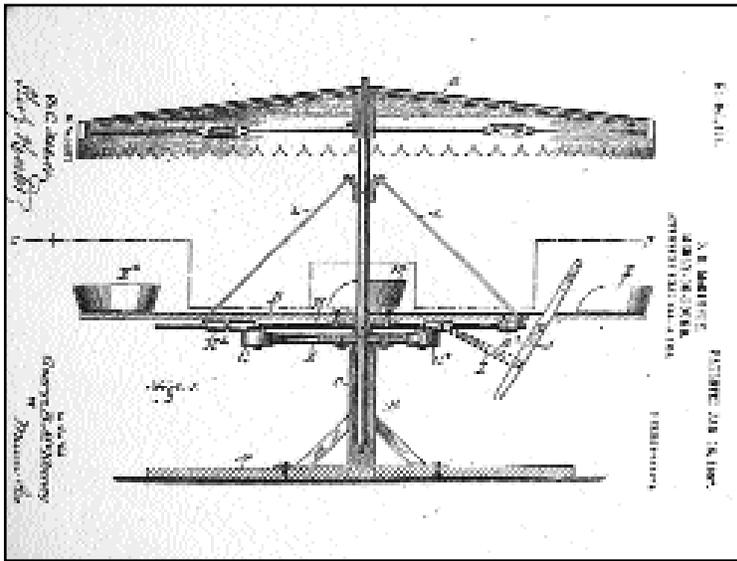


Figure 8. A patent drawing (#841,424, patented Jan. 15, 1907) details the four seat “Merry-Go-Round.” In the patent he notes: *The object of the invention is to provide a new and improved merry-go-round arranged to allow one or more of the passengers to readily propel the merry-go-round without requiring undue physical exertion on the part of the operators.*

The catalog list of “some of our customers” contains around 350 names and was probably printed in 1908, the last endorsements being dated the spring of 1908. The list of names contains bank and company presidents, doctors, and lawyers, but not the name of F. M. Antunes of Puerto Rico. When his 986 pound box (probably containing the top of the line 12-seater) was shipped June 20, 1908, it may have been too late to be included in the catalog.

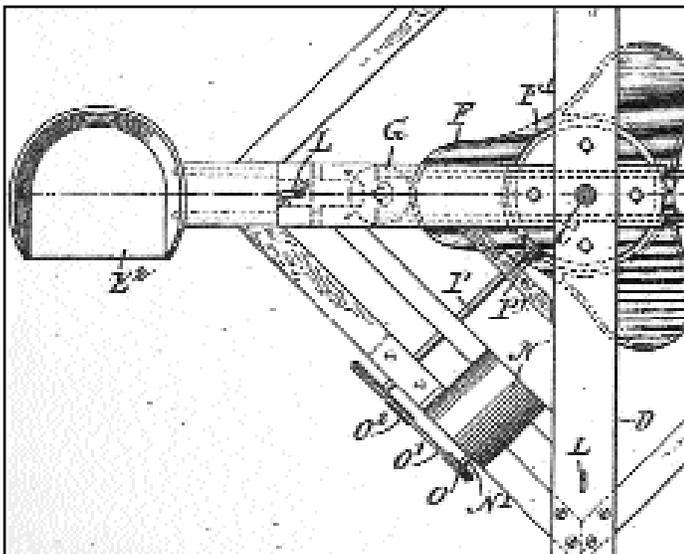


Figure 9. A description of the above organ “N” in U.S. Patent #842,424 reads as follows: *An organ N, mounted on the platform D and traveling around with the same, is actuated automatically from the fixed cam, and for this purpose the following arrangement is made: A driving-shaft N<sup>1</sup> is provided with a pulley O, connected by a belt O<sup>1</sup> with a pulley O<sup>2</sup>, secured on a shaft P, journaled in suitable bearings arranged on the platform D. On the inner end of the shaft P is secured a friction-wheel P<sup>1</sup> in engagement with an annular track F<sup>1</sup>, formed in the fixed cam F, so that when the platform D is rotated, as before explained, it is evident that the friction wheel P<sup>1</sup> rolls off on the fixed track F<sup>1</sup>, and consequently a rotary motion is given to the shaft P, which by the pulleys O<sup>2</sup> and belt O<sup>1</sup> is transmitted to the driving-shaft N<sup>1</sup> of the organ N.*

Was I disappointed in our finds? Not really. Researching an emigrant German family who, through inventiveness, perseverance, and belief in the “American Dream” made good, was enough reward in itself. Besides, one of the buildings George Ertel built in 1896 was later remodeled and converted into the Bijou Theater. Who knows what's hidden behind a false wall or in a basement corner? Maybe someday I'll look into that.

### Organ Information

A brochure description of the organ notes that: *THE ORGAN, which is one of the enjoyable features of the Merry-Go-Round, is a full grown instrument. It is nearly two feet long, by a foot high, has a good strong bellows and is an instrument that can be heard. It is very durably built. Of course it should not be left out of doors in rainy weather, because organs are put together with more or less glue, particularly the bellows parts. However, if ordinary care is observed, the organ is one that will last for a very long time. The music rolls are durable and will be found very satisfactory.*

*A belt is attached to one of the wheels of the Health Merry-Go-Round and the other end fastened around a small wheel which operates the organ. Thus the faster the Merry-Go-Round the more spirited the music.*

In a letter dated Oct. 28, 1907, Thos. Jasper (Secretary) wrote to the Manager of Sacandaga Park, Gloversville, NY, and among other claims of the Health Merry-Go-Round stated that *The organ, which goes with every machine, is an added delight for the children, making it just like the big Merry-Go-Rounds. Could more be said? We send three music rolls, and others can be had at slight cost.*

Yousuf Wilson is a reformed carpenter and cabinet maker who, for the past 25 years, has made his living restoring foot pumper and reproducing pianos. He is now involved in building the second of “his and hers” street organs using Wurlitzer 125 rolls.