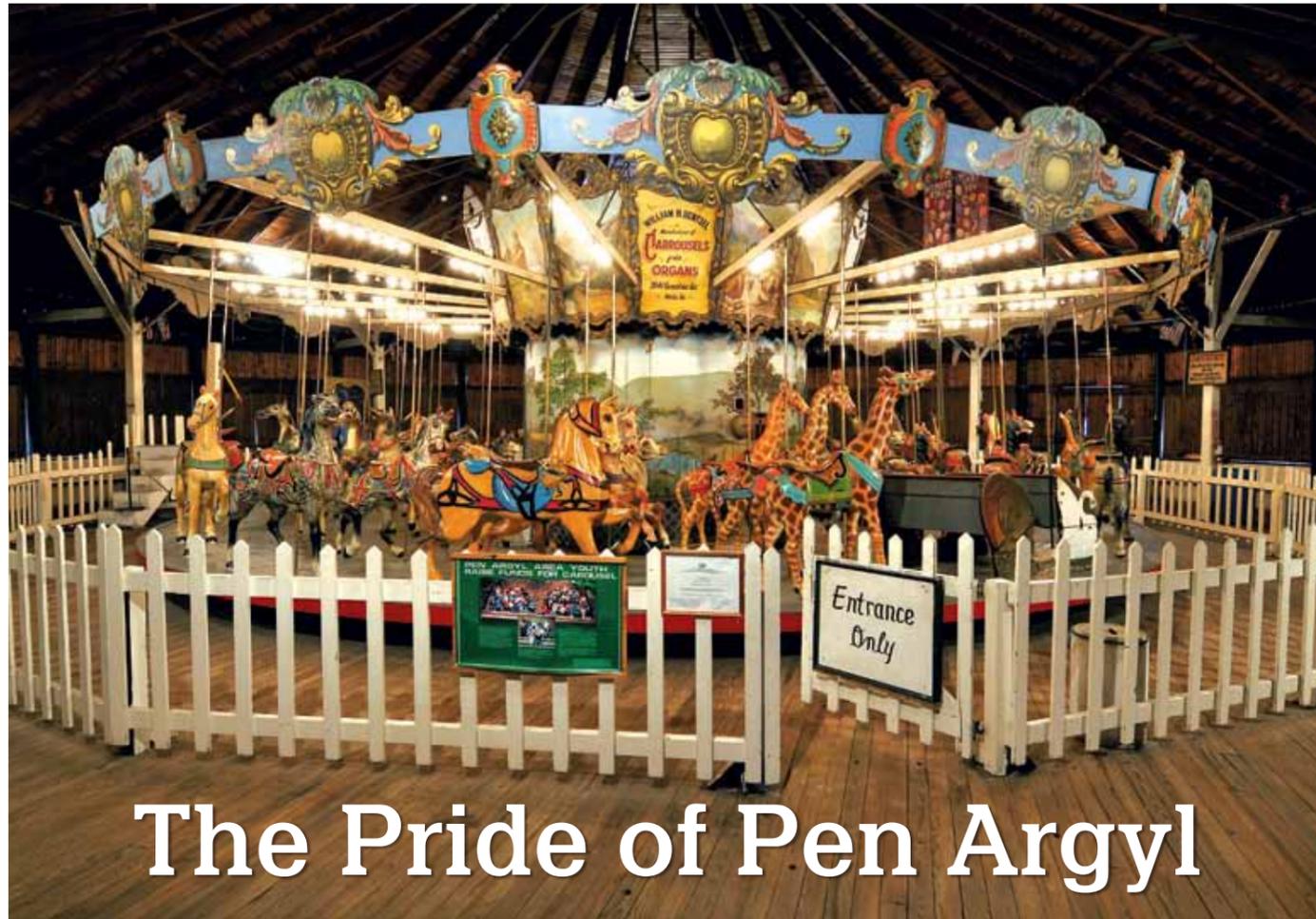


local legends



The Pride of Pen Argyl

Grabbing the Brass Ring at the Weona Park Carousel

Close your eyes and try to remember what it was like. The child-like innocence of being in the moment, feeling the sensation of a warm breeze against your face as the sounds of a circus organ fills your ears. The soothing feeling of riding around and around on a charming carousel—there's probably no other experience quite like it.

The quaint borough of Pen Argyl is located just north of the Lehigh Valley in the Slate Belt. It's comprised of a small population of particularly proud people—so proud that they wanted to have something so unique that it would be hard to find another town with one. Since 1923, a classic wooden Dentzel carousel, circa 1900, has called Weona Park its home. This hodgepodge of a carousel, as Pen Argyl Public Works Director Steve Bender refers to it, is a composite of several different carousels, or machines, as they are called, containing 44 animals—34 horses and ponies, three goats, three giraffes, three deer, one zebra,

and two chariots. It is reported that some of its features can be traced to a machine once located in Brandywine, Delaware. "When the carousel makers came over here from Europe, a common practice was that they would actually lease the machines to parks," Bender explains.

A BIT OF A MENAGERIE

Pen Argyl wanted to purchase theirs, so a group of people traveled to the Dentzel Carousel Company factory and bought the machine. The Dentzel factory is believed to have been located in Philadelphia, but "that cannot be proven nor disproven because there was a fire in the '50s that destroyed all the records," according to Bender. Cabinet-maker Gustav A. Dentzel immigrated to the Philadelphia area in 1860



The carousel's rarest animal, the zebra, and beautifully hand-painted giraffes.

from Germany where he worked with his father as a carousel carver. He continued this tradition and is credited as one of the first American carousel-craftsmen pioneers. Pen Argyl's carousel was actually manufactured during Gustav's son William Dentzel's time. While Pen Argylites visited the factory, they chose a variety of animals so one could say it is a bit of a menagerie; they were repainted at the factory and then installed.

Some of the oldest animals on this carousel date back to 1896; the youngest dates back to 1920, according to Bender, via members of the National Carousel Association and the now defunct American Carousel Society. "Many of [the members] are collectors so they're familiar with the style of the carver and time period [the carvers] had worked," Bender says.

The local legend is this, Bender begins to explain: Weona Park was first built to accommodate a baseball field. "What was happening was the fans were using slate dumps as the grandstand, so the owners were concerned," says Bender. "Harold Young held a meeting in 1919; 117 people attended and they all agreed that they needed a new location." A suitable plot of land was found and purchased for \$5,000, and by 1921 a field was in place as well as a band shell and picnic area. One quarry donated a steam shovel and another quarry donated laborers, Bender says. "It's written in one of our history books how

doctors and lawyers worked hand-in-hand with local loafers," he adds. "Everyone just came together to build the park."

By 1923, the carousel was built, and a parade through town that June marked the official carousel opening. "A Mr. Parsons—a quarry owner here—was the first rider and he paid \$100 for the first ride," Bender says, "and each rider thereafter paid \$10 and it's said

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that the carousel was paid for in one day." The carousel cost \$6,000. "If you look at the park, it mimics the old trolley parks," Bender says. At the end of a trolley line sat parks usually containing carousels on a much smaller scale. It gave those who waited something to keep them occupied.

As one could imagine, a carousel of this age, size, and caliber certainly requires maintenance. "Every year we have to go over each nut and bolt," Bender says. It also undergoes weekly maintenance checks and lubrication so it becomes rather extensive, but they've been successful at keeping it running. During several winters past, there have been times when the carousel was taken completely apart to realign the gears. The top bearing was also replaced with the center mast from a ship; it's completely suspended. Fortunately, there are active steam engine operators knowledgeable with simple gear mechanisms and flat belts that have helped with repairs.

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Every animal has a different face and smile, and each head is slightly angled outward.

In addition, Friends of the Carousel, a group that has become instrumental in keeping the carousel alive, is a reminder of what a tiny community can do for itself, according to Pen Argyl Borough Manager Robin Zmoda. Rob Tinney, Phyllis Heard, and Representative Craig Dally are members of this group.

Zmoda, while serving as councilwoman, began extensive research and reporting on the carousel in the late '90s to ensure its place in history. Today, the carousel remains on the National Historic Registry, which means it cannot be dismantled and sold piece by piece. If someone were to ever purchase it, he or she would have to purchase the entire machine as a whole. "It assures us that it will stay here," Bender adds.

FIVE-MINUTE RIDES FOR A DOLLAR

This process began while the carousel was undergoing restoration and conservation, which launched in 1994. "We retained an artist from Highland Park, Illinois," Bender says.



Artwork on the carousel's suspended center mast depicts natural landscapes and scenery.

With the help of the American Carousel Society, artist Lisa Parr, who owns Old Parris Inc., a carousel restoration company, was located and commissioned to remove old varnish from the animals that had begun to give them a muddy brown appearance. Parr also filled in areas of the paint that had chipped away, giving the animals a colorful new lease on life. "What makes

this machine so rare is that its in original factory body paint so we couldn't take away from that," Bender reveals. Parr completed the project using a reversible varnish on the animals once they were clean. She says the carousel was quite extraordinary because the animals

were in fine form. "The park is well used and the carousel is well loved," she adds.

To raise funds for this initiative, the borough established an Adopt-a-Horse benefit in which local individuals and organizations bought horses ranging in price from \$1,700 to \$3,300. Each donor received a plaque inscribed with the horse's name as well as a commemoration. The project raised well over \$100,000. All proceeds benefitted the restoration, and the project was completed in nearly four years.

Today, the carousel runs to the sounds of a cassette tape playing Knoebels Grove tunes; however, Bender says, it once boasted a band organ beneath the carousel's surface. When it broke down and no one wanted to fix it, Bender says it mysteriously disappeared.

The carousel operates seasonally beginning Memorial Day in May on Fridays from 6-9 p.m. and Saturdays and Sundays from noon-9 p.m. until Labor Day. Visitors pay a mere \$1 for a 5-minute ride. Bender says it is also opened for special events throughout the year. It has even served as a wedding location as well as a place for class reunions (40th,

50th, 60th). In 1993, it hosted the American Carousel Society convention and in September 2009, the National Carousel Association will make a stop along its tour. This July, the Slate Belt Heritage Society will pay tribute to its residents' of Cornish, Welsh, and Italian descent with tours and demonstrations throughout Pen Argyl—which will, of course, include a stop at the carousel.

Bender refers to it as Pen Argyl's best-kept secret, and perhaps this sentiment rings true, as many Valley natives are unaware of its existence. As with anything familiar, people tend to overlook the carousel because it's right in their backyard, but when social interest groups come through it revitalizes their outlook. As charming and distinctive as it is, there are, of course, those against the carousel calling it the "great white elephant" because of the cost and upkeep. But for residents like Zmoda and her children, the carousel became a Friday-night ritual of pizza and summer spins. Whether you're a Pen Argyl resident or visitor, it's time to be a kid again and come ride the carousel. Oh, and don't forget your children! **S**

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