

Determining the Facts Reading 1: From “Little Wars” to Merry-go-rounds

The history of the carousel has been long and changing. The first evidence of carousels is relief carvings, which date back almost 1,500 years. Carousel-like contraptions were used around the world. Places like Mexico, India, and China used them long before they became popular in Europe and America. For example, the Aztecs (from south-central Mexico) had an entire ceremony, called the Game of the Flyers, based on the use of one of these structures. Individuals dressed like birds of prey and were hung by their heels, head down, from an eighty-foot pole. The ropes were wound tightly around the pole then let loose, sending the rider spiraling outward like flying birds.

In Europe and America, carousels originated to aid in military started as a way to train the military. In fact, the word carousel or *carosello* means “little war” and can be traced to twelfth-century Arabian games of horsemanship. Riders would play a game that involved tossing a perfumed clay ball from one rider to another. The object of the game was to catch the ball without letting it break. When the ball broke it spilled the sweet, “unmanly” perfume contained inside. By the 1500s, this game had become huge tournaments in Europe called “Carrousel.” The most famous of these was *Le Grande Carrousel* held by King Louis XIV of France in 1662. A modern carousel still stands on this location.

Carousels started being used as a ride in the 1600s. French noblemen who wanted to become knights trained for spearing contests using an early version of the modern carousel. They “rode” legless wooden horses that were attached to a center pole. As they rode in circles around the pole they practiced spearing through small hanging hoops. These early carousels eventually became into a popular form of entertainment for peasants and nobles alike. A horse, mule, or man that pushed, pulled, or cranked a center mechanism powered these early models. Carousels continued to become more ride-like as time went on. In the 1860s Frederick Savage patented both a portable steam engine and the overhead gears. The engine turned the carousel, while the gears moved the animals up-and-down.

In America, early nineteenth century wheelwrights, carpenters, and blacksmiths built carousels in their off-season. These early American carousels were often made of log-like horses hung from the center pole by chains. These rides were often placed in picnic groves in rural areas of the United States. As early as 1800, advertisements were found for horse “circle” rides in cities like Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, and Boston. As the country grew, new immigrants brought their carousel-building and carving skills to America. They brought knowledge of carousels from their home countries in Europe. This led to a “golden age” for carousels in the United States. Men like Gustav Dentzel, Charles Loof, and Allan Herschell created new and beautiful hand-made carousels for amusement parks across the country. The “golden age” came to an end when factories started mass-producing carousel animals in the 1920s, especially after World War II.

The Empire State Carousel at The Farmers’ Museum is hand-made like the carousels of the “golden age.” Master carver Gerry Holzman built the Carousel with the help of over 1,000 volunteers. They all believed in the artistic and historic value of handmade carousels. The Empire State Carousel is a complex piece of folk art that stands for the state of New York and its people. The Empire State Carousel is made up of twenty-four carved animals, all native to New York, twenty-three portraits of famous New Yorkers, and eight art panels representing different regions and important events in New York’s history. It is one of only forty three carousels in New York.