



**ARKANSAS HISTORIC  
PRESERVATION PROGRAM**

**Sandwiching in History Tour  
Over-the-Jumps Carousel  
Little Rock Zoo, 1 Zoo Drive, Little Rock**

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By Ashley Sides

Special thanks to: Dustin Bean and the Little Rock Zoo staff



*Over-the-Jumps Carousel  
Photo by Ashley Sides, 2024*

## Welcome and Introduction

Hi! Welcome to this month's Sandwiching in History tour at the Over-the-Jumps Carousel! I'm Ashley Sides with the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. We

often tour historic buildings, but all kinds of properties can be listed on the National Register of Historic Places, like carousels, for example.

On behalf of all of us, I want to thank the Little Rock Zoo for graciously allowing us free entry for the tour and for providing a complimentary carousel ride afterward. Dustin Bean in particular has been very helpful; and I know he and the rest of the staff have been extra busy lately preparing an even bigger carousel celebration event next week in honor of this attraction's 100th anniversary.

## The Improbability of this Carousel Still Being Here

This ride has been entertaining people for a century. But that's only part of what makes it special. Over-the-Jumps is a unique type of carousel. Only a handful were ever made, and this is the last known one in operation anywhere in the world. The best part is that, unlike most other rare and one-of-a-kind antiques, this carousel isn't in a museum, off-limits to touch; it's still in daily use, so you can enjoy it in the same way your grandparents—or even great-great-grandparents—may have enjoyed it one hundred years ago.

What are the odds, though? The vast majority of historic wooden carousels have long since ceased to exist. In the golden age of carousels, from the mid- to late 1800s on up through the 1930s, many thousands of hand-carved wooden carousels were produced (maybe 8,000, depending on who's counting), but today only around 200 remain.<sup>1</sup> Over such a long period of time, carousels are vulnerable to deterioration, abandonment, and ruin. Upkeep is expensive, and handmade carousel animals are valuable, so carousels that do remain are often broken up and sold piece by piece to collectors. Over-the-Jumps has faced most of these threats as well, but its owners for the first 70 years kept it together, painted, and running, and then in the 1990s, just when its future was looking

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<sup>1</sup> National Carousel Association, "Census of Classic Wood Carousels (Condensed)" <https://carousels.org/USACensus/stdqueries/census-cCLA.html>

bleak, a remarkable statewide campaign of volunteers and specialists rallied to save this treasure.

## The Traveling Carousel

The Over-the-Jumps carousel debuted in the summer of 1924 at the Aurora Exposition and Fair in Aurora, Illinois. It was owned by C.A. Wortham’s World’s Best Shows, a traveling carnival company that toured a circuit of central states.

For that reason, the new carousel was a transportable model, made to be taken apart, packed into trucks or trains, and reassembled at the next location. For nearly twenty years, the carousel traveled with the carnival from state to state, delighting riders at fairs both large and small, including at the Arkansas State Fair, which was held at this location sporadically in the 1920s and ’30s, when this area was known as Fair Park.

Over the years, our traveling carousel got treated the way you would have expected. As paint wore off the horses, they were repainted, often very differently. Mechanical parts got replaced as needed. In fact, the track underneath that the platform rides on as it turns is not original. It seems to have come from a different ride called the “Caterpillar.” The carousel was originally powered by a steam engine, but at some point early on it was converted to run on electricity.

A couple of the horses even ended up getting swapped out. Carousel experts have identified that 38 of the 40 horses were made by the Spillman Engineering Company or its predecessor, the Herschell-Spillman Company, in the 1920s. But two of the horses are the Trojan, or Roman, type, with cropped manes. This is the distinctive design of the Allan Herschell Company, a related but competing carousel manufacturer. All of these companies were based in North Tonawanda,

New York, and were the nation's leading producers of transportable, Country Fair Style carousels.

## Over-the-Jumps

But although Allan Herschell, Herschell-Spillman, and Spillman Engineering manufactured thousands of hand-carved wooden carousels in the late 1800s and early 1900s, they did not make many like this one.

Over-the-Jumps was a special model. You'll notice that the floor is not flat, like on most carousels; it's wavy. And the horses are not attached to poles that move up and down vertically. They are attached to a flexible wooden platform that rolls along the undulating track, causing the horses to pitch back and forth as they fly over hills and valleys. It's a much more realistic feeling of riding "over the jumps."

This design was never mass-produced or offered in catalogs as a standard production model. Although the new type of motion was popular, the mechanism was prone to breaking down, and the carousel spent as much time being repaired as it did operating. An expensive, high-maintenance ride, it was not in high demand among operators.

It is believed that the Spillman Engineering Company produced fewer than 10 of this type, and many believe there were no more than four or five. This is now the last one known in existence, let alone in operation. Legend has it that one of the other ones sank during ocean transport and two of them were lost to fires.

Over-the-Jumps made an impression when it debuted in 1924. In its first few years, newspapers from Dallas to Kalamazoo often named it—along with the Caterpillar—as one of the modern rides being offered at fairs to attract visitors. *The Florida Times-Union* of Jacksonville described it for their readers: "A wonderful new ride is Over The Jumps, built by Spellman [sic] Engineering Co.,

under patents, originated by [H. F.] Maynes, known for his Caterpillar, and Over The Falls—two of the biggest sensations ever presented in the realms of shows playing under canvas. Over the Jumps is having its premier in Jacksonville. Brand new, it is the big attraction among the rides. It is an Ocean Wave arrangement, built close to the ground, however, and when seated the little horses roll in a gentle grade up and down ...”<sup>2</sup>

## At Home in Arkansas

Here at Fair Park, a permanent amusement park midway became part of the landscape in 1929, part of a multi-year development plan that included this zoo, a ballpark, golf course, and swimming pool. One company, Keenan, Hemphill and McQuilken of Oklahoma City, leased the midway for several years in the 1930s and had some amusements on it, including a miniature train and some kind of carousel.

Traveling companies also set up temporary carnivals at Fair Park, a notable one being the Goodman Wonder Shows. They traveled the country, but Little Rock was where they wintered. Goodman Wonder Shows seems to have been the owners of this Over-the-Jumps carousel by the early 1940s, so it’s reasonable to assume that this carousel was making visits here during that time.

The Fair Park midway caught the eye of a traveling carnival owner named Tom Fuzzell who had Fuzzell’s United Shows. He wanted to settle down with an amusement park in a permanent location, so he leased the Fair Park midway from the city in 1942 and established his fun park there.

The previous tenants, Keenan, Hemphill and McQuilken, had to go, taking their old train ride and carousel with them. This prompted a burst of nostalgia. The

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<sup>2</sup> “Johnny J. Jones Exposition Delights First Day Crowds,” *The Florida Times-Union*, November 21, 1924, p. 7

*Arkansas Gazette* lamented that “Little Rock said goodbye ... to a Fair Park merry-go-round on which perhaps half the children in the city have ridden during the past 17 years.”<sup>3</sup> This sounds ironic to us now, knowing the legend that would replace it.

Within a few months, in 1943, Fuzzell bought Over-the-Jumps from the Goodman Wonder Shows and installed it permanently in Fair Park. Arkansas children are still making memories on it over 80 years later.

Buying the carousel wasn’t a stroke of genius, though; Fuzzell got lucky. What he really wanted was a rare, nineteenth-century Wurlitzer band organ. The *Arkansas Democrat* interviewed him in 1969 and reported that “to get the organ, he had to buy two rides along with it, one the flying-horses merry-go-round which he thought would be a bust but which is still a favorite among the children. The package deal, as he remembers it, cost him around \$20,000.”<sup>4</sup>

The organ rested in a carnival wagon in front of the pavilion and played the tunes as the carousel turned. Years came and went, and new rides and attractions were added. Fair Park was renamed War Memorial Park after the end of World War II. Fuzzell managed the park for 30 years and turned it over to Doc O’Kelley in 1973. Somewhere along the way the organ faded into history. But the carousel gained a loyal following.

One kid who grew up loving this carousel was Lloyd Choate, better known as Mokey. The Choates were a traveling carnival family based out of White County. As an adult, Mokey Choate toured with the family show for a while, but in 1982 he bought War Memorial Amusement Park from Doc O’Kelley. Choate explained, “I’d wanted it ever since I was a kid but couldn’t afford it. The man that owned it kind of made it where I could.” The carousel, of course, would be the main

<sup>3</sup> “Old Merry-Go-Round Known to Thousands Removed from Park,” *Arkansas Gazette*, December 13, 1942, p. 19

<sup>4</sup> Lancaster, “Organ: A pied antique pipes at the park,” *Arkansas Democrat*, August 5, 1969, p. 1

attraction. Choate admitted, “That’s the reason I really liked the park. I was interested in the old merry-go-round. Adults like me who rode it as kids have got kids of their own now.” What he said then is still true today: “There’s a lot of folks got a lot of memories in this park.”<sup>5</sup>

## Carousel in Danger

But with every passing year, the condition of this carousel and other historic wooden carousels was getting more precarious. In 1983, the year after Choate took over War Memorial Amusement Park, the National Carousel Association sounded the alarm about the risks to these carousels. In a letter to preservation officers around the country, they wrote, “As the years pass, we lose a minimum of ten to twelve carousels a year due to speculators after the wooden animals as well as to natural causes. Soon, there will scarcely be a carved, wooden carousel in America unless we all work together.” For Arkansas, they called particular attention to Over-the-Jumps as an especially noteworthy merry-go-round, which, if destroyed, “would be a tragic loss to America’s heritage.” They reiterated the urgency of carousel preservation, saying, “At the rate they are falling, within ten years the Great American Carousel could be only a memory.”<sup>6</sup>

Choate knew the treasure that he had. He knew this was the last one of its kind, and that wooden horses were no longer being made. But those horses had been carrying kids over the jumps for some 60 years by that point, and they were showing signs of wear. The paint was old and cracked, and Choate knew they needed to be stripped and repainted. He was interested in restoring the carousel, but it would be a tedious and costly process, which would require grant assistance. A person can only do so much.

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<sup>5</sup> Zeigler, “Holding on to childhood memories,” *Arkansas Democrat*, December 11, 1983, p. 3-5.

<sup>6</sup> Walker (National Carousel Association), Letter to Preservation Officers, October 1983.

But what he could do was hold on to it. Choate had a modern carousel that he sold for \$125,000. An intact wooden Spillman from the 1920s was priceless. There was a lively collector's market for original hand-carved horses, and even in those days, he could have easily gotten five figures for each horse. But Choate resolutely refused to consider selling Over-the-Jumps.

In early 1989, he and Julius Breckling, director of Little Rock Parks and Recreation, approached the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program about getting the carousel listed on the National Register of Historic Places. National Register listing is honorary and doesn't directly prevent the destruction of historic properties, but it can unlock many preservation resources, including significant grant funding in some cases. Among city and state officials, there was unanimous support in pursuing this listing. (Yes, childhood nostalgia did play a role.) In December 1989, the Over-the-Jumps Carousel was officially granted National Register status.

But the clock was ticking. The ride was becoming increasingly dilapidated. It—and especially the horses—were in need of repair and restoration. Above all, the pavilion roof that protected the ride desperately needed to be replaced. It got to the point that they had to stop running the ride because the vibrations could collapse the structure. Choate was unsuccessful in lobbying the City of Little Rock to help pay for a new roof. By 1990, the amusement park's heyday was past anyway, and Little Rock was exploring plans to redevelop War Memorial Park and do away with the midway. A feasibility study suggested that the carousel could be incorporated into the zoo.

Choate was faced with selling out and shutting down the amusement park. Offers came from buyers in Great Britain, Las Vegas, and Texas to purchase the carousel. Choate put them off, saying it wasn't for sale—not just yet—in the hopes that a local buyer could be found to keep it in Arkansas.



And here's where the story gets really heartwarming, because in 1991, citizens from around the entire state began pulling together in a massive, sustained project to save the endangered Over-the-Jumps Carousel.

A woman from Stamps heard that the carousel might be sold out of state. She contacted state senator Mike Kinard, because she knew he liked carousels. Sen. Kinard reached out to Gov. Bill Clinton's office and was referred to Ken Grunewald at the Department of Arkansas Heritage. Ken and his wife, Marlana, were already keen on the carousel, especially with the department having recently nominated it to the National Register of Historic Places. So together with Kinard, they spearheaded the formation of a nonprofit organization called Friends of the Carousel to purchase and restore this piece of history. Volunteers joined an executive board and a statewide committee, and led by people like Joan Gould and David Martinous, they organized for an ambitious undertaking.

Choate would sell Over-the-Jumps to the Friends of the Carousel for a reduced price of \$250,000, but they would have to put the first \$75,000 down within three months and pay the balance within six months. To raise that kind of funding in such a short time, they blitzed the media with stories about the carousel and the project, took out advertising, and launched an open-ended fundraising campaign. They knew that it wouldn't end with \$250,000. Once they had the carousel in hand, it might cost another million dollars to restore it and provide permanent housing.

With the appeal to "Keep the Memories Turning," they solicited donations of all amounts and kinds. An individual membership as a Friend of the Carousel was priced at \$10, with additional levels of prestige attached to higher levels of giving. For \$5,000 you could adopt a pony and become a "Pony Parent," which gave you the right to name your adopted horse. Under each pair of horses you see a plaque with their names; these are the names given by their Pony Parents. The Friends of

the Carousel didn't make the six-month fundraising deadline, but Choate gave them an extension.

In 1992, after the Friends of the Carousel purchased Over-the-Jumps, they dismantled the ride and put the parts in storage, just before the pavilion roof fell in.

## The Long Road to Restoration

Now began the next phase: restoration. Becky Witsell oversaw the process of restoring the horses. After some training and consultation, the committee decided the best approach would be the most difficult. Rather than strip the horses to the wood and apply fresh paint, they needed to carefully remove the accumulated layers down to identify the original paint so it could be replicated. Witsell and a team of highly trained “paint pickers” scalpeled away bygone eras of paint, layer by layer. They sent samples of the original paint to a laboratory for analysis. Once it was documented, the original paint was fully removed, because it contained toxic ingredients like lead, and the horses were repainted with fresh nontoxic paint that matched the original look. Horses and chariots were shuttled around between different workers around the state as each undertook a portion of the project one or maybe two horses at a time. The work of repairing broken parts, in addition to paint removal and restoration, was done by Rick Parker and Bob Pennick at Parker Restoration in Gentry. Many horses had 30 layers of paint; one had 43. In other words, over the 67-year career of the carousel up to that point (1924–1991), the horses were being repainted every other year or so.

The laborious restoration process of the horses and chariots alone ultimately took 14 years. In addition, the mechanical parts had to be reconstructed, and a new pavilion had to be built.

Restoration work was conducted as the funds were available, so fundraising was a constant process. Now that the carousel was in storage, they couldn't let it become "out of sight, out of mind," or the donations would dry up. Key to the fundraising process was public outreach and education. Friends of the Carousel held workshops on restoration and conservation each year throughout the state, they loaned out restored horses for exhibits at museums, they made presentations to civic groups, they partnered with schools and helped them integrate aspects of the project into various curricula, and for several years they maintained an open studio in Little Rock where the public could visit, see work taking place, and gain an appreciation for the cause.

None of this was straightforward and simple, though. Conditions kept changing and they had to stay agile. There was no single storage site large enough for all the carousel pieces, so the parts were catalogued and housed all across the state wherever secure space could be found. In 1998 the building that housed the studio was sold and the Friends of the Carousel had to find a new location for their office and studio purposes.

They moved temporarily into the Choctaw Route Station, the old train depot east of downtown (which had housed Spaghetti Warehouse and which was currently empty and had not yet been converted into the Clinton School of Public Service). But in 2000, burst water pipes and the subsequent collapse of the part of the ceiling damaged some of the horses, stands, chariots, wheels, and office materials that were being stored in the room below. Once again, new space had to be found and items had to be relocated.

Funding continued coming in from individual donations, pony adoptions, aluminum can recycling drives, and numerous grant applications. For example, the Department of Arkansas Heritage awarded over \$200,000 in grants over several years.

But money doesn't tell the full story. Countless people also made in-kind contributions, whether that was storage space, volunteer labor, free publicity, museum exhibits, transportation, etc.

There were many, many heroes in this story.

The rescue and restoration of the Over-the-Jumps Carousel was truly a statewide community effort. Thanks to the tenacious commitment of many people over many decades investing their time, money, and labor, this carousel has been preserved.

And in 2007, 16 years after the ride closed down, it reopened in its new permanent location here at the Little Rock Zoo, just a stone's throw from where it used to stand on the War Memorial Park midway.

## Conclusion

And that brings us to today! Since 2007, Over-the-Jumps has been back in operation. It is 100 years old this year, and if it continues to be well cared for, it will continue to make memories for people for many generations to come. Its National Register status helps it qualify for Historic Preservation Restoration Grants from the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program; it has received another \$76,000 from AHPP since 2010 for additional restoration work necessary to preserve it, especially given the wear and tear of daily use.

At any given time, you may see a couple of horses missing, as they are rotated out to the shop for repainting and refurbishing. The carousel requires a lot of ongoing care and investment, but it's a small price to pay for preserving this national treasure here in Arkansas and keeping it running for public enjoyment.

In a moment you'll get to ride it, and I'm going to have Dustin Bean of the Little Rock Zoo instruct you about that.

First, I want to thank you all for coming and invite you to our next tour on November 1<sup>st</sup> at the Museum of Automobiles on Petit Jean Mountain. We'll talk about its history and appreciate its special architecture, and while I won't be presenting about the cars per se, I do want to mention that you can see an actual Herschell-Spillman engine on display. As one of the great carousel makers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Herschell-Spillman had the expertise in small-engine production to branch out into automobile motor manufacturing during the 1910s and 1920s. Hope to see you there!

Now over to Dustin.

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