

John Zalar, PTC #65, and PTC #66

By Barbara Williams, NCA Archivist, assisted by Brian Morgan

My interest in Philadelphia Toboggan Company carousels and carver John Zalar was initially sparked by my love for PTC #62, the carousel on Santa Monica Pier.

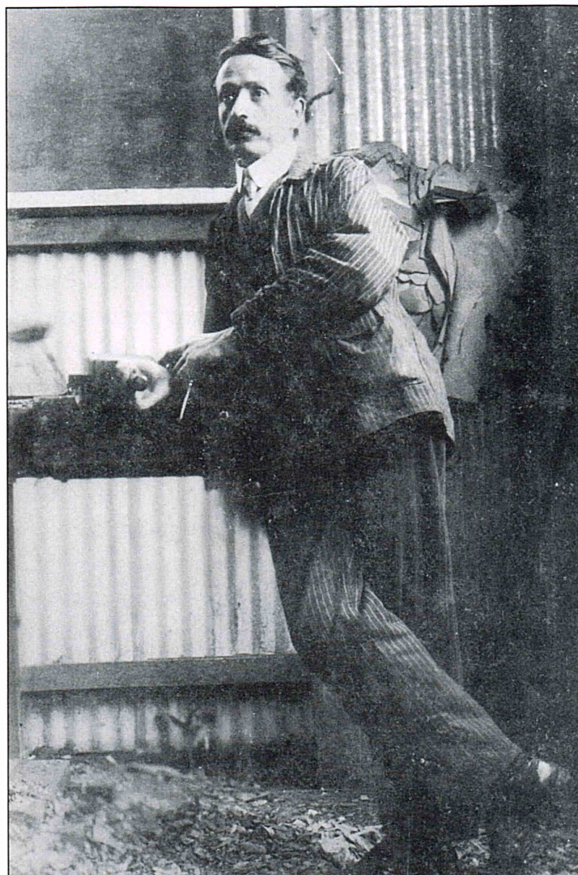
As I began to spend more and more time with this carousel, I became curious about PTC and the carvers who created its carousels. This fascination led to many discussions with my mentor, Fred Fried, who shared his knowledge of PTC, and to a visit to the PTC offices in Lansdale, Pa., where I spent a day viewing and copying many of the PTC photographs.

In 1980, inspired by Fred's wonderful enthusiasm, I decided to search for PTC's long-lost carver, John Zalar. Thoughts at that time were that the "high-eyed" PTC horses, c. 1911, were his. We now know this attribution was the result of confusing Zalar's name with that of Leo Zoller, a carver employed prior to Zalar.

At that time, we knew Zalar left PTC due to poor health and came to California, but that's all. He seemed such an important figure in the history of carousels; it was unfortunate that Fred's long and conscientious search for him turned up nothing. (We eventually learned that the spelling of his surname was changed from Zahler to Zalar; the East Coast records had the original spelling.)

So, I began searching. I went to Los Angeles' enormous Hall of Records and looked through vital statistics books. Based on Fred's speculation about when Zalar left the East Coast, I began with the year 1920. By afternoon, I was into 1925, when suddenly, there was his name. He had died on November 8 of that year. I ordered a copy of the death certificate and went home to await its arrival. When it finally came, it had the signature of his eldest son, then 20, Sylvester John Zalar.

Next, I looked through telephone books and found a listing for S. J. Zalar in the city of La Crescenta, located northeast of downtown Los Angeles. With much apprehension, I called. Sylvester John Zalar answered the phone. Yes, he said, his father had been a wood carver. He had carved carousel horses for a shop in Pennsylvania



John Zalar poses, with mallet in hand, at the Loeff factory in Long Beach, Calif., in 1914 or 1915.

Photo courtesy of Sylvester and Geraldine Zalar.

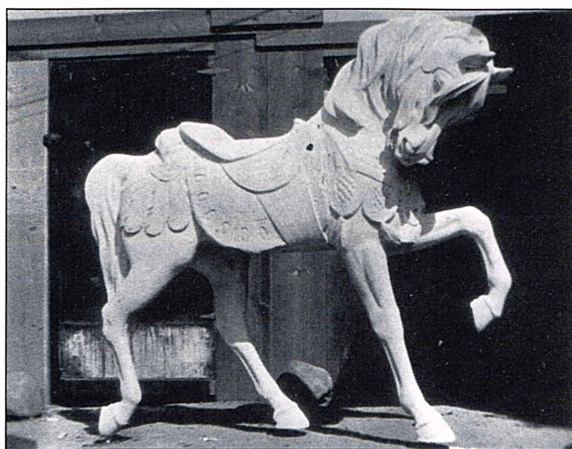
a long time ago. I couldn't believe it—I'd found John Zalar.

Over the next few months, I met with Sylvester and his wife, Geraldine, and began to compile the information they graciously shared with me about the Zalar family. During one visit, they brought out an old box of photographs that had not been looked at for many years. We untied the string around the box and opened what proved to be a genuine treasure chest.

Inside were both amateur and professional family photos, PTC and Loeff factory photos, photos of John Zalar and his artwork taken before he came to America, and snapshots of some unpainted (Zalar) horses.

Sylvester told me about the unpainted horses. He said that his father had remained under contract with PTC after leaving the factory, carving horses for the company at his home in California. Whereas the factory had used carving machines to make roughs of the body parts, Zalar

Top: This is the horse pictured, center front, in the interior photograph of PTC.



Middle: The horse to the right of the center is mostly obscured by the rider's dress and blends with the background. See the matching rump strap, blanket fringe, double cantle (upward curving rear of saddle), and definition of the hind legs.

Top and middle photos courtesy of Sylvester and Geraldine Zalar.

Bottom: PTC #65 in Chattanooga, Tenn. The outside-row horses, center and right of center, are Zalar's. The other horses also appear to be Zalar's. Notice the difference in the lower edges of the upper rims in the photographs of PTC #65 and #66.

Photo courtesy of the Philadelphia Toboggan Company.

used only his hand tools to carve these horses. He and his son worked on the horses in a small backyard shed, sanding, priming, and crating them for shipment to PTC when they were finished.

According to an article in Charles J. Jacques Jr.'s *Amusement Park Journal* (Vol. 5, No. 4), records exist of PTC having received 23 stationary horses and four chariot sides from John Zalar.

Locating the Zalar family and learning the specifics about John's employment as a carver of carousel horses established that he was with Looff from 1911 to 1916 and with PTC from 1916 to about 1925. We also learned that in 1920, while he was ill with tuberculosis, he had brought his family to California in an effort to improve his health.

That John Zalar had carved 23 outside-row PTC standing horses, all completely by hand, is truly unique. And, Zalar's last beauties possessed all of the grace and elegance of his earlier work—a remarkable feat, considering his ill health. Sadly, he died in 1925, at the age of 53.

Ever since finding the Zalar family and seeing

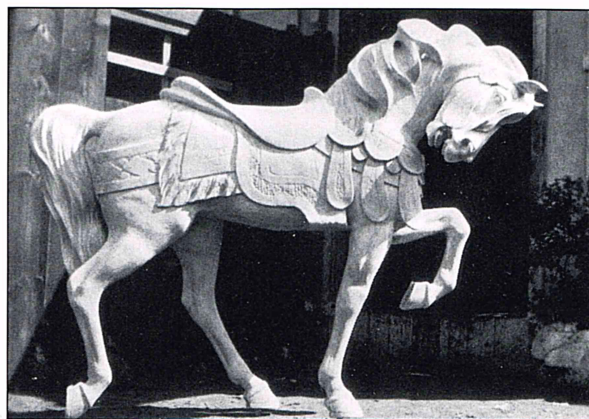
the photographs of the horses Zalar carved in California, I (and others) have compared the horses pictured with PTC horses of the same period, in hopes of finding them (there was no documentation as to which carousels they went on).

In the beginning of my search for the Zalar horses, it seemed logical that, as the master carver, he would have been responsible for the outstanding horses produced between 1916 and 1925, the years he was with PTC.

Because PTC had several different master carvers, PTC styles vary, yet the horses are always readily identifiable as PTCs. With more study, I saw that they also vary considerably within the periods associated with certain prominent carvers. Zalar's style is as distinct as the others, yet some horses that seem to be Zalars vary just enough to make me wonder.

PTC #65 was built while Zalar was employed as a carver. The outside-row horses were especially beautiful. Unfortunately, PTC #65 was one of the great carousels that didn't make it.

Built in 1923, the carousel was installed in



Riverview Park in Des Moines, Iowa, then moved in 1928 to Chattanooga, Tenn., where it burned in 1930.

Early last year, I pinned a copy of a photo of PTC #65 to my bulletin board, to admire. I looked at it with a magnifying glass, studying the fine details on the horses and on the framework of the carousel. One of the horses looked familiar. For the first time in a long time, I got out the copies of the Zalar photographs.

I couldn't believe it. There was one of Zalar's California horses. I looked further. There was another one! I frantically tried to match the other California horses with horses in the photo, but they didn't match. I got out three other photos of PTC #65 and tried again without success. Perhaps they were on the other side of the carousel.

Later last year, while exchanging information on PTC carousels with NCA member Fred Dahlinger, I sent copies of PTC #65 photos—some from Des Moines, some from Chattanooga. One had been repeatedly identified in publications as the unique, enormous building that housed the carousel in Des Moines. However, Dahlinger matched it to one appearing in post-cards of Luna Park at Coney Island in New York.

But PTC #65 wasn't at Coney Island, PTC #66 was.

This meant that the interior photo, previously identified as PTC #65 in Des Moines, must also be of PTC #66 at Luna Park. The decorative windows were the same. There was no obvious difference in the area outside the building. Only the placement of the band organ differed.

In further comparing the supposed PTC #65 (Des Moines) photos with photos of PTC #65 in Chattanooga, I noticed that the lower edge of the outer rims were different. PTC #65's is all light

bulbs, while PTC #66's alternated light bulbs with decorative trim. The photos were of two different carousels.

I telephoned Laura Grauer, archivist for PTC. She obligingly looked up the photos of PTC #65. On the backs of the photographs of the building exterior and carousel interior now in question was written, "Des Moines." Written on the back of the three photos of PTC #65 in Chattanooga was the word "Chattanooga," crossed out. PTC #66's file had no photos.

Because it is not known who wrote the location of the carousels on the backs of PTC's historical photographs, we can only assume accuracy. In the case of PTC #65 and PTC #66, we now know errors were made, but not by whom or why.

We also don't know what happened to PTC #66. Its original location is listed as "Luna Park (Schraft), Coney Island, New York." How long it

PTC #65 in Chattanooga, Tenn. (building exterior).

Photo courtesy of the Philadelphia Toboggan Company.



stayed there and what became of it are a mystery.

So, not only did I find two of John Zalar's California horses, I connected with Fred Dahlinger—thanks to him, we can look at photographs of PTC #66 for the first time.

Now a new challenge presents itself—finding images of PTC #65 in operation in Des Moines.

PTC #66 at Luna Park, Coney Island, N.Y. All of the outside-row horses but one (front, center) appear to be Zalar's. The exception, the white horse with lattice-like fringe, a trapping not commonly found on PTCs, has a different face.

Photo courtesy of the Philadelphia Toboggan Company.

