
From a “Ring Boy” for Frederick Dolle to Builder of His Own Carousels

M.D. Borrelli and His Role in the 20th Century Amusement Industry



Loeff lion from Fun Forest, Seattle, with distinctive Borrelli jewels. Photograph courtesy of Guernsey's, New York, New York

By William Benjamin, Ph.D.,
and Barbara Williams

Special to *The Carousel News & Trader*

In our previous article in *The Carousel News and Trader* (January, 2010) concerning Frederick Dolle, we included valuable insights about Dolle that were detailed in a letter that M.D. Borrelli sent to Frederick Fried in 1963. This letter was obtained from the Frederick and Mary Fried Folk Art Archives located in the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. We referred to this as the “Borrelli letter”.

Carousel reference books have primarily focused on two aspects of Borrelli's individual contributions, his role as a carousel builder, using his own frames together with figures carved by others, and for his addition of jewels, many feel to an excessive extent, to the figures on his carousels. As we

detail in this article, further research has provided a more complete history of his life and his role in the amusement industry during the 20th century.

M.D. Borrelli's early life

The Borrelli family hailed from San Gerardo, Caserta, Italy. Caserta is located about 10 miles north of Naples. M.D. Borrelli stated in the “Borrelli letter” that his father had wanted him to enter the priesthood, but the Mount Vesuvius eruption, in April of 1906, “killed all prospects of being a priest”. “I just wanted to leave and get away from all the past experiences, it was then I decided I wanted to come to America.”

Mario Domenico Borrelli arrived at Ellis Island on March 3, 1907 aboard the ship *Deutschland*. In his immigration records, he provided his name as Domenico Borrelli. He arrived without any fellow family members and in possession



The Deutschland, the passenger ship upon which Mario Domenico Borrelli immigrated to the United States.

of only \$10. He claimed that he was 15 although subsequent records show that he was only 13 at that time. Even though he indicated that he would stay with his brother Francesco in the Bronx, New York, he made his way to the home of his cousin Joseph Borrelli who, according to the 1910 census record, lived in Cliffside Park, New Jersey.

Cliffside Park was very near to Little Coney Island, where Borrelli obtained his first job with Frederick Dolle as a “ring boy”. Copies of his World War I and World War II military registration documents and his death certificates provide his full name as Mario Domenick (changed from Domenico) Borrelli, although in his professional life he referred to himself as M.D. Borrelli. Due to conflicting information in these documents we couldn’t determine the exact month of his birth. He was born either on July 31st or August 31st, 1893. We also have not been able to find information about Borrelli’s wife. Where we expected there to be references to his wife, we found none. His U.S. Naturalization document from August 12, 1924 does not list a “wife” and shows that



Immigrants arriving at Ellis Island, circa 1905.

he has no children. This is interesting because the Silver Beach carousel website indicates that Borrelli and “his wife” placed jewels on that carousel’s figures in the summer of 1924. As shown later, Borrelli’s World War II military registration document lists his brother Vincent as his contact person, not his wife.

Partnership with Frederick Dolle’s Wife Elizabeth

We previously detailed the period between 1907, when M.D. Borrelli began working with Frederick Dolle, and the time of Dolle’s death in late 1912 (*The Carousel News and Trader*, January, 2010). We were able to identify and trace eight carousels that were manufactured during that period. In his letter to Frederick Fried, Borrelli indicates that he became a partner with Elizabeth after Frederick’s death and that his partnership “was to operate and manage” the two



View of Virginia Beach boardwalk and amusement area, circa 1910. Borrelli would operate a carousel here with Dolle’s widow, Elizabeth.

Barbara Williams collection



M and E AMUSEMENT CORP.

179 29th STREET - AVALON, NEW JERSEY

May 23rd 1963

M. D. BORRELLI
SEC.-TREAS.

PHONE 987-7141

Letterhead from the "Borrelli letter". Could M and E have represented the first initials of Mario Borrelli and Elizabeth Dolle?

carousels currently owned by the Dolles located in Virginia Beach, Virginia and Lake Orion, Michigan.

M.D. Borrelli's military registration card dated June 5, 1917 shows that he was living and working at the Virginia Beach Casino as a "machinist" and was employed by E. Dolle. We previously had not been able to determine the location of the Dolle carousel in Virginia Beach but this document suggests that it was placed at the Virginia Beach Casino, which was incorporated in 1911.

A man in the photograph of the Dolle carousel at the Park Island Amusement Park in Lake Orion, Michigan (see the January article) was previously identified as Vincent Borrelli. At that time, we didn't know the relationship of Vincent to M.D. Borrelli.

Vincent (Vincenzo) Borrelli has now been determined to be M.D. Borrelli's younger brother. His immigration documents show that he arrived in the United States on September 25, 1913. Vincent's arrival occurred less than one year after Frederick Dolle's death and is clearly linked to assisting his brother M.D. and Elizabeth with the running of the Park Island carousel. In the 1930 United States census, Vincent Borrelli, together with his wife Hazel and his newborn son Michael Vincent (b. April 28,

1929, d. February 27, 2000) are shown to reside in Camden City, New Jersey. Vincent lists his occupation as "Operator, Amusement Device". It isn't known if he was still working with his brother at that time.



Image of M.D. Borrelli's World War I military registration card.

Borrelli Carousels

While it is not known exactly how many carousels Borrelli produced, the number of surviving individual figures with his distinctive jewels is quite plentiful. Borrelli may have continued to purchase figures from Charles Carmel after Dolle's death. Some carousels attributed to M.D. Borrelli are composed of mixtures of figures, likely from other carousels, many of which have the distinctive Borrelli jewels. It has been difficult to determine the dates that Borrelli's carousels were made and placed. It isn't always clear whether they were constructed during his partnership with Elizabeth Dolle or after he assumed controlling interest in the business following her death. Or, perhaps carousels on

which we see Borrelli-jeweled figures were built by others using figures from original Borrelli carousels.

Marshall Hall Amusement Park, Charles County, MD

One of the earlier carousels attributed to Borrelli, but possibly dating to Frederick Dolle because of the exclusive use of Carmel horses, was at Marshall Hall Amusement Park, Charles County, Maryland.



Inner housing of Marshall Hall carousel showing original artwork. Courtesy of Gray Tuttle.



Marshall Hall carousel, circa 1960. Courtesy of Burkey W. Boggs



Marshall Hall carousel, circa 1960. The shape of the rim panels is like those on Dolle's carousels at Park Island, Lake Orion, Michigan and Clason Point, Bronx, New York, but the decorative painting on the rim is much different. Note the overhead speaker, indicating piped-in music was being used at that time. Courtesy of Burkey W. Boggs

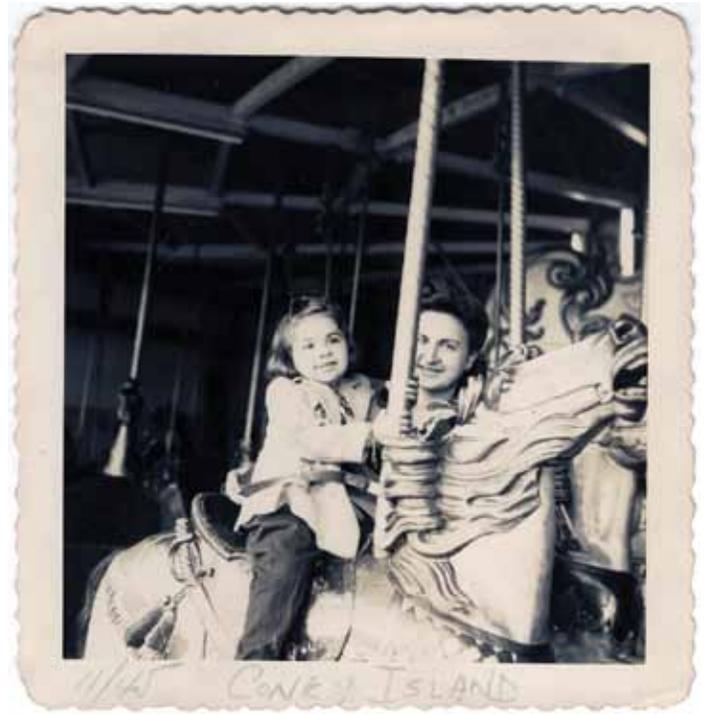
The park at Marshall Hall originated in 1889 and early issues of the *Washington Post* indicate the presence of a carousel in the park as early as 1896 along with a Ferris wheel, baseball field, bowling alley, and dancing. The early carousel may have been replaced with the carousel seen here. Without its date of installation, which we have been unable to determine, it is difficult to positively attribute it to either Dolle or Borrelli. Gray Tuttle, who bought the horses and animals in spring of 1974, stated in *The Carousel News and Trader*, June, 1988, "It was a Carmel-Borrelli with a lion, a sea monster and two armored horses. All gears were stripped on the machinery, so it was junked."

The B & B, Coney Island, New York

In his letter to Frederick Fried, Borrelli mentions that Carmel carved his last set of figures for him "...as he became



The B&B Carousel on Surf Avenue, Coney Island, circa 1990's. Courtesy of John Caruso



B&B Carousel on Surf Avenue, Coney Island, November, 1945. Barbara Williams Collection

aged and sick...he made for me, since I had affected such good friendship with him." Charles Carmel passed away in 1931, so presumably Borrelli obtained these figures in the 1920s. Borrelli says that he then bought a Mangels carousel frame from a Mr. Johnson and shipped the carousel to Bertrand Island Park, New Jersey, where it operated for three years. Borrelli indicates that it was then sold to the B&B Carousel Company on Surf Avenue, in Coney Island where it was operating at the time he wrote the letter in 1963.

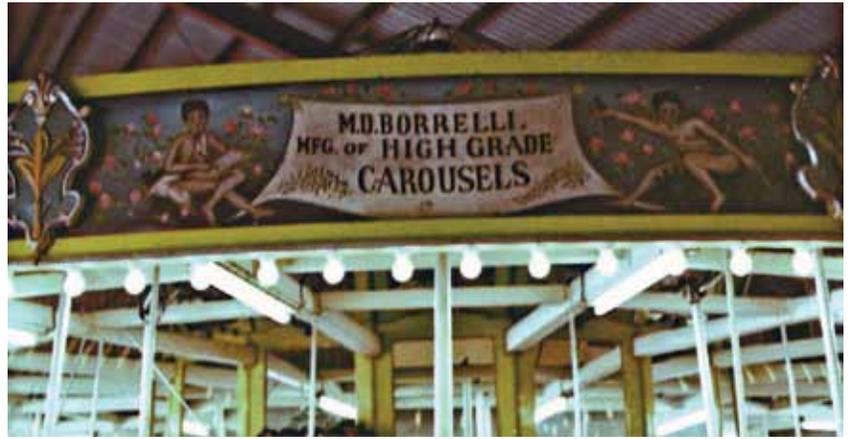
The B&B, Coney Island's last wooden carousel, continued to operate at this location until 2005 when it was saved from possible dispersment at auction by the city of New York. Revitalization plans for Coney Island include placing the B&B on the boardwalk near the Parachute Jump ride.



View of the Ocean City, Maryland boardwalk, circa 1960. Barbara Williams collection



This tucked-head Illions horse is similar to one seen at Fun Forest, Seattle, Washington.



An Illions-jeweled jumper.

Carousel at Playland Park, Ocean City, Maryland, circa 1970s. Photographs by Gray Tuttle. The top right and bottom two photos courtesy of Rol and Jo Summit.



A Borrelli-jeweled Carmel stander.

Playland Park, Ocean City, Maryland

A carousel at Playland Park, on the Boardwalk at Ocean City, Maryland, had a rounding board that prominently stated "M.D. Borrelli, MFG of High Grade Carousels".

According to Leah Farnsworth (*The Carousel News and Trader*, September, 2007) the carousel was a mixture of Carmel, Illions and Dentzel horses. She also indicated that the outside row horses as well as the inner row Carmel and Illions horses were jeweled. Rol and Jo Summit are of the

opinion that the jewels on the Illions' horses are the work of Illions, not Borrelli. More photographs of this carousel are seen in Leah Farnsworth's article.

Fun Forest, Seattle, Washington

A carousel with perhaps some of the most heavily jeweled Borrelli figures was installed at the 1962 World's Fair in Seattle, Washington. When the fair closed, an amusement park, Fun Forest, was established at the site. The carousel had a sign indicating that it was manufactured by Borrelli.



The Fun Forest Seattle carousel in 1979 shows the extensive jeweling and modern metal platform. Joan Cole photo



Heavily jeweled Carmel armored stander. Joan Cole photo



Carmel armored stander, Fun Forest, Seattle, WA.
 Photograph courtesy of Guernsey's, New York, NY

Prior to Fun Forest, the mixed carousel was owned by Paddy Conklin, an important figure in the Canadian traveling carnival business who had placed the carousel on the Canadian side of the Niagara Falls. Prior to that, the sign indicates that the carousel had been located at Manasquan and Wildwood, New Jersey.

The Fun forest carousel was a mix of Loeff, Carmel and Illions figures. There was a Loeff sea monster and a Loeff lion. The lion was very similar to the one seen on the Dolle carousel at Park Island, Lake Orion, Michigan. The Illions "Lincoln horse" at Fun Forest, profiled in Marianne Steven's article entitled *The Lincoln Carousel Horse Quest* in *The Carousel News & Trader*, December, 2009, was originally on the Seaside Heights, New Jersey, Illions carousel.



Fun Forest Seattle chariot in park paint.
 Photograph courtesy of Guernsey's, New York, NY



Fun Forest, Seattle Chafatino stander in park paint.
 Photograph courtesy of Guernsey's, New York, NY

There was also an Illions flying mane outside row horse. What can be seen of the scenery panels in the central housing area suggests modern changes, as is the metal platform. Both European and American style spiraling is seen on the brass poles.

Seaside Heights, New Jersey

The Illions carousel at Seaside Heights, New Jersey was originally at Coney Island where it was known as the Chafatino in the name of the family that owned it. According to the Chafatino family, the carousel was an intact Illions when it left Coney Island. Installed at Seaside Heights in 1956, the carousel, now known as Freeman's, had six standing Borrelli-jeweled Carmels and a Dentzel lion and tiger. Three Carmels stood inside of the lion; three others were inside of the tiger. According to Floyd Moreland, prior to placement



Chafatino carousel at Coney Island. The flying mane stander was at Fun Forest along with its second row partner, as identified by Rol and Jo Summit. Photo courtesy of The Summits

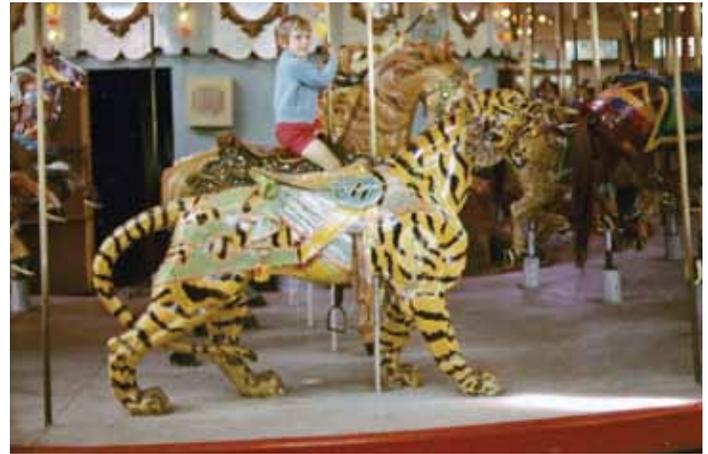


Freeman's, Seaside Heights, New Jersey, circa 1950's.
Courtesy of Floyd Moreland.

of the Illions at Seaside Heights, a Borrelli carousel was installed there from 1955 to 1956. It replaced the Dentzel that burned in the summer of 1955. Was Borrelli's presence at Seaside Heights responsible for some kind of a swap between his carousel and Freeman's?

A total of six Fun Forest Chafatino-style standing Illions' figures were sold at Guernsey's auction in 1988. The Illions Lincoln horse had been stolen prior to the auction. That leaves one missing horse to match the number of absent stationary Illions' on the Seaside Heights carousel.

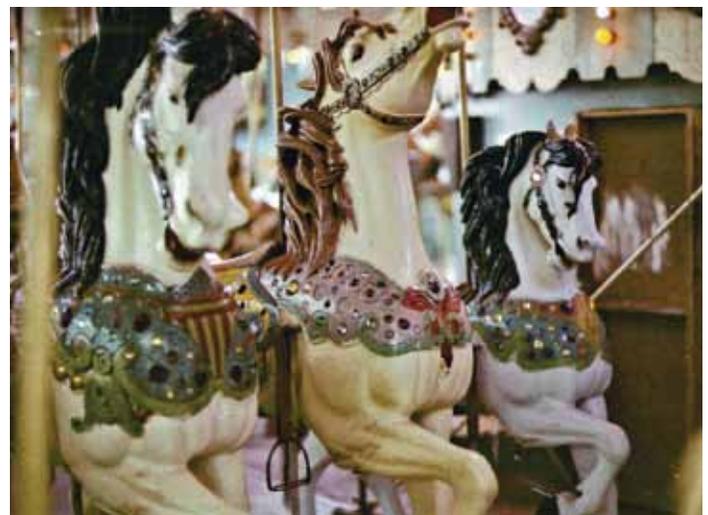
The Illions' on Borrelli's Ocean City carousel are Chafatino-like. They must have come from another Illions of the same period (1923-1924) that was parted out.



Dentzel tiger at Seaside Heights, New Jersey, circa 1970's.
Photo by Gray Tuttle, courtesy of Rol and Jo Summit

Roller Skating Businesses

In his letter to Fred Fried, Borrelli indicates that he ventured into the roller skating business in 1937, shortly after Elizabeth Dolle's death. He first opened a roller skating rink in Gloucester City, New Jersey in 1937 and operated the rink at this site until 1950 (*The Billboard*, November 18, 1950). He subsequently acquired the MacArthur Roller Dome in Franklinville, the Alcyon Park Roller Rink in Pitman, and the Sunset Beach Roller Rink in Almonesson, all in New Jersey. Two advertisements in May, 1943 issues of *The Billboard* newspaper refer to activities at his Roll Arena Recreation Center in Gloucester and Sunset Beach Rink in Almonesson. During the war years, Borrelli lived in Gloucester, New Jersey, as indicated in his military registration card from April 27, 1942, which also shows that he was employed by the Olympia Amusement Corporation, one of his business corporations. The card also indicates that his brother Vincent lived in nearby Grenloch, New Jersey.



(Left) One row of Carmel standers on Freeman's at Seaside Heights, New Jersey, circa 1980.

Photo by Dr. Norma Menghetti, courtesy of Floyd Moreland

(Above) A second row of Borrelli-jeweled Carmels on Freeman's.

Photo by Gray Tuttle, courtesy of Rol and Jo Summit



Borrelli's Sunset Beach Park, Almonessen, New Jersey, circa 1953.

Barbara Williams collection

Sunset Beach Park, Almonesson, New Jersey

Borrelli's foothold in Almonesson seems to have led to what was likely his last large amusement venture. He describes it quite well in his own words in the letter to Fried, "In the year of 1941, I purchased a former picnic ground, on Almonesson Lake, N.J. I developed the area, and called it Sunset Beach Park, Almonesson, N.J. and operated it as an amusement park, till 1958. In my development I installed bowling alleys, a ballroom, a bathing beach, boats for hire, and four refreshment and eating stands. This ballroom was the finest in the East with accommodations of 1,500 people at one time, and the first ballroom to be air conditioned by Carriers, Inc., Syracuse, N.Y. In the year of 1958, I was stricken with a heart condition, and later on the same year, I was stricken again twice...my physical condition forced me to sell this park, for 30 cents per \$1.00 valuation, and accept retirement."

Interestingly, the sale of Sunset Beach Park led Borrelli to file a lawsuit against Varbalow Realty Company, which had placed \$250,000 into an escrow account for the purchase. This deal fell through and Borrelli sued for the funds in May, 1958. Two years later the Supreme Court of New Jersey ruled in Borrelli's favor in a case known as Sunset

"In the year of 1941, I purchased a former picnic ground, on Almonesson Lake, N.J. I developed the area, and called it Sunset Beach Park, Almonesson, N.J. and operated it as an amusement park, till 1958."

Beach Amusement Corp vs. Belk 33 N.J. 102 (1960). This case is often cited to this day in legal decisions in support of a litigant being rewarded by charging its legal expenses against a "fund".

The carousel at Almonesson has features seen on Dolle carousels. The rim scenery paintings, panel shapes, and lighting are very much the same. The sweeps have decorative scrollwork, the central housing panels are characteristic with bold frames and large mirrors. The Borrelli jewellery is evident on the standing horse and chariot side. The reflective spots on the central housing mirror panels may be jewels or mirrors.

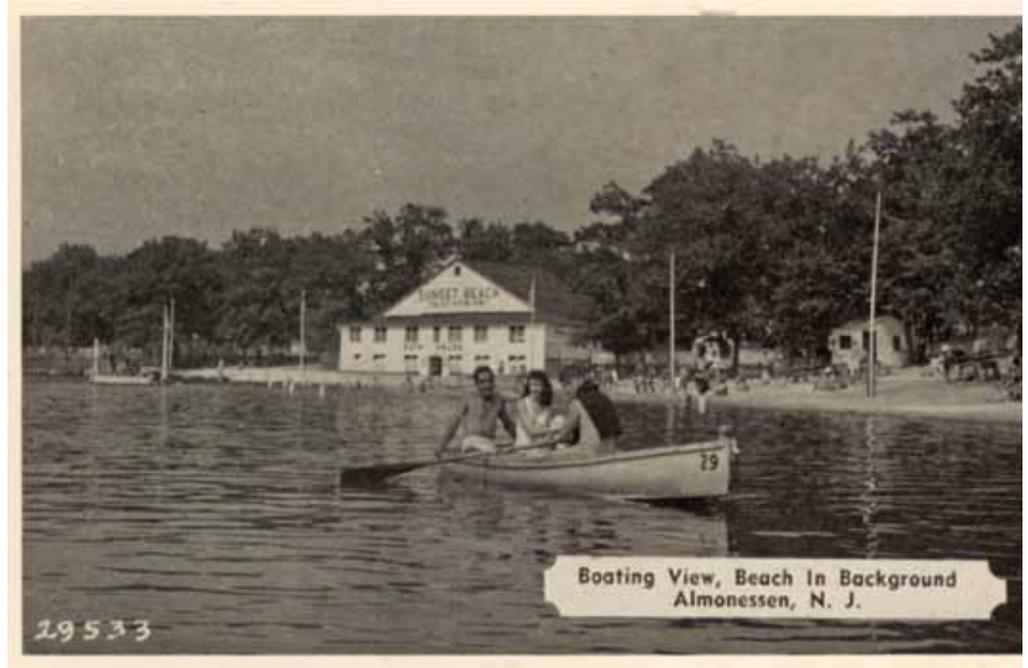
One Last Carousel

Although it seemed that his illness and sale of Sunset Beach Park would be the end of his amusement industry career, Borrelli indicates in his letter to Fried that he had regained sufficiently good health by 1963 to have completed the building of one more carousel and was in search of a suitable location for its placement. "I would like to continue, to be with children and people, as the amusement business has always been a part of my life, and is very dear to me, and they are missed very much as a part of my life."

We have not been able to determine whether or not this

**Lakeside View
of Borrelli's Last
Amusement
Venture, Sunset
Beach Park,
Almonessen,
New Jersey,
circa 1953.**

Barbara Williams collection



carousel was ever put into operation.

Mario Domenico (Domenico) Borrelli passed away in Broward County Florida in February of 1969. His legacy lives on in existing Borrelli-jeweled carousel figures and in the memories of his carousels. Whether he enhanced carousel figures with his jewels or ruined them is a matter of opinion. It cannot be argued that his jewellery was truly unique.

Postscript

In this article are facts, tie-ins and loose ends. Borrelli's career as a carousel builder is addressed in-part only as we take a look at a few of his carousels. How many more there were and where they were located is the rest of the story.

We found some wonderful information about Domenico Borrelli's background and family and it's a joy to finally know his full name! There are still lots of stones to turn over in researching his carousels. It is hoped more about Mario Domenico Borrelli will come to light.

REGISTRATION CARD—(Men born on or after April 25, 1877 and on or before February 16, 1897)

SERIAL NUMBER: 1 NAME (Print) ORDER NUMBER

1. NAME (Print) **MARIO DOMENICK BORRELLI**

2. PLACE OF RESIDENCE (Print) **410 Jersey Ave. Almonessen, Camden 27**

3. MARITAL STATUS

4. TELEPHONE

5. AGE IN YEARS **48**

6. PLACE **Italy**

7. DATE OF BIRTH **7-31-1893**

8. NAME AND ADDRESS OF PERSON WHO WILL SIGN FOR YOU **Vincent Borrelli (Brother) Greenback 27**

9. EMPLOYER'S NAME AND ADDRESS **Olympic Amusement Exp. Jersey Ave. Almonessen 27**

I CERTIFY THAT I HAVE VERIFIED ABOVE ANSWERS AND THAT THEY ARE TRUE

D. N. S. FORM 1 (Revised 1-1-42)

Mario Domenico Borrelli

Image of M.D. Borrelli's World War II military registration card. He was 48 years old.

Contributors:

1. *Burkey W. Boggs. Marshall Hall photographs.*
2. *John Caruso. B&B carousel photograph.*
3. *Fred and Mary Fried Folk Art Archive, Smithsonian. Borrelli letter.*
4. *Dr. Norma Menghetti. Freeman's photograph.*
5. *Dr. Floyd Moreland. Freeman's photographs, Seaside Heights information.*
6. *Rol and Jo Summit. Freeman's and Ocean City photographs, Chafatino photograph and information, Fun Forest information.*
7. *Gray Tuttle. Ocean City photographs.*
8. *Fred Dahlinger. Historical insights.*
9. *Guernsey's, New York, NY. Permission to use photographs from their Dec. 10, 1988 "The Carousel at Auction" catalog.*

Note about the authors:

The Borrelli biographical and business enterprise research and presentation are by William Benjamin. Carousel observations are by Barbara Williams.

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