

IN MEMORIAM: BOB VARGA 1928-2009

# A Tribute to Bob Varga and His History of Oklahoma Carousels



*Primitive, horse-powered, suspended swing-ride with buckboard seats in Ada, OK. Photo circa 1890. Photo credit: Dell Maxwell*

By Barbara Williams

*Special to The Carousel News & Trader*

From 1998 to 2001, carousel enthusiast, Bob Varga, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, searched for material about his home state's past and present carousels. Bob didn't have a computer when working on this project, so it was labor intensive; chasing rumors, making phone calls, haunting libraries, driving to see the newly-found operating carousels so he could see for himself what they were like. Most of the historic carousels he found information about were not previously known to exist. Oklahoma does have a rich carousel history and thanks to Bob, we now know about it.

In 1999, Bob wrote, "In 1985, *Daily Oklahoman* columnist, Bob Lee, wrote about reflections about what he and his readers remember about Oklahoma's carousels. Since I was researching Oklahoma's carousel history, and had al-



*Here is the photo of Bob Varga that was sent by the family for use with the article. It was said that the family likes this photo because it was a happy day.*



**On the reverse - "Willie Baldwin and Ozeeta Hall at the Oklahoma State Fair, September 1943." In a different handwriting is "Mother".** Barbara Williams collection

ready found a surprising amount of information, I wondered if he was still interested in the subject and wrote to him, asking for his help in locating more information and photographs. He was very interested and proceeded to run two columns in 1999, listing me as the contact person. The first column came out the morning of Memorial Day. I was on the phone most of the day and had fascinating conversations with mostly older folks about the old days in many aspects. I learned a great deal about carousels and places that people remembered and I was even promised some photos. While some of the recollections were vague, I have included them in the listing as I feel they add to the over-all picture of just how many carousels Oklahoma had."

Bob passed away on March 7, 2009 at age 81. The carousel world has lost a devoted friend. He was a faithful contributor to the National Carousel Association's archives and a strong supporter of the carousel museums. He closely followed carousel restoration projects and Six Flags' (formerly Premier Parks) buy-up of parks, fearing for the future of the carousels under their ownership.

Bob was born on February 16, 1928, in New York City. He was a World War II veteran, having served in Japan in the Armed Forces Radio. He was a university professor in the Speech & Drama Department at Oklahoma City University. Among his professional accomplishments, he authored and directed children's plays. His many interests included biplanes, carousels, steamboats, women's softball, the theater and a life-long love of teddy bears. He was predeceased by his wife, Jane. He is survived by his sister, Irene; his children Janice, Terrie and Chris, daughter-in-law, Tamara; grandchildren Sarah, John, Kristin, Austin, Lauren and Jason.

Bob and I began our correspondence in 1997 when I was archivist for the NCA. He had so many questions about various carousels, figuring I had the answers in the files. Because of his inquiring mind, I learned a lot! In our correspondence, we talked about our lives, our families, the downsides of living where there are perils - his Oklahoma tornadoes, my California earthquakes, and carousels, of course. Bob's 2008 holiday greetings had wonderful news



**Maggie Hendrix, at age five, on the Bartlesville carousel in 2007. Maggie's mom, Lisa, says, "Riding the carousel is always, in our family, the last ride of the night. As it turns out, it was my mother's custom as a child too, so this is a third-generation tradition."** Photo: Lisa C. Childs

- he had email! We did start emailing, exchanging pictures and I was looking forward to much more.

Bob's family sent me his carousel collection. Through their generosity, I am able to share Bob's Oklahoma carousel research and photos. In gratitude, thank you, Bob, for being such a wonderful friend. To Bob's family, thank you for giving me this opportunity.

## OKLAHOMA'S CAROUSELS:

*Information compiled by Bob Varga*

### Ada

Primitive, horse-powered, suspended swing-ride with buckboard seats. It was operated by John William Maxwell in the Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations in Garvin County, the Indian Lands of Oklahoma Territory (now the town of Center). This information was submitted by Dell Maxwell, great-niece of John Maxwell. (Photo on page 29).

### Bartlesville, Johnstone Park Kiddie Playground

This is an all horse, circa 1930, three-row metal carousel with thirty jumpers and two chariots. Johnstone is a small



**Film transfer of the carousel at Craterville. Credit: Bob Varga**



**In 1998, Enid's carousel ran clockwise. Photo credit Bob Varga**

city-owned amusement park with a total of sixteen kiddie rides. It is situated near the Tom Mix Museum and Frank Lloyd Wright Price Tower. Johnstone Park opened in 1947 with the carousel arriving a little later in 1951. The park is open from May to September, with staffing by volunteers.

(Photo above left).

### **Carnegie**

This recollection was in response to Bob Lee's column in *The Daily Oklahoman*: "There was a carousel, about twenty feet in diameter, in a round building."

Bob's Varga's Update: Carnegie did have a carousel, but the wood horses were sold off in 2001. It was a fourteen-section, Allan Herschell machine. The frame remained at the site as of July 2001. (No photo).

### **Craterville**

There was a carousel in a Craterville amusement park. In the 1950's, when the original town site was designated as a wildlife refuge, the amusement park closed permanently, and the town itself was relocated. At the new Craterville, Lake Lawtonka was created and that town site is now under water.

In a reader's response to Bob Lee's column in which Craterville's carousel was described as "small", the reader said, "I can guarantee that if you were three-and-a-half feet tall, six-years-old, and had never seen one before; the carousel at Craterville was definitely not small!" (Photo left).

### **Duncan**

A carousel with twenty jumpers is operated at Duncan on Fair days and special occasions by the Kiwanis at their kiddie park.

A fond reflection by local, Patricia Brandon: "Summer evenings, the park is filled with children, parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, etc. The little ones have their favorite horse on the carousel and tears flow when the horse is taken. But, there's always next time."

Bob Varga thought the carousel animals looked like fiberglass, 1950's vintage, and that the chariots were crude, not like originals.

Recent attempts to confirm the present-day status of the Duncan carousel were unsuccessful. (No photo)



**Elk City Carousel in Ackley Park. Webshot photo**

### **Elk City, Ackley Park**

On May 26, 2001, Elk City unveiled its brand new Centennial Carousel. It is a three-row, thirty-six horse machine. It has six hundred lights, a forty-five foot hardwood platform and features all wooden trim. The carousel was custom-built by Dan Horenberger of Brass Ring Entertainment in Sun Valley, CA. It has wooden horses carved by Ed Roth.

### **Enid, Meadowlake Park**

This is a 1925 Allan Herschell, three-row, half and half, with twenty seven jumpers and two chariots. Three of the jumpers are half-sized horses. It had a band organ at it's previous location, Hellum's Amusement Park, near Enid, where it was installed in 1928. The carousel was given to city of Enid in 1965 and placed in Meadowlake Park. The carousel is city-owned and is operated by Kiwanis Club, which also owns Meadowlake's Chance train ride. The Lions Club owns the airplane and car rides. Meadowlake has an arboretum, picnic area and the lake for which the park is named. The park is open from Memorial Day to Labor Day. (Photo above left).

### **Eufaula**

Bob Lee's *Daily Oklahoman* column prompted this recollection: "A large carousel was installed around 1920 and was sold in either 1979 or 1980. It was a big machine." The carousel's site is now a ballpark. (No photo).

### **Fort Cobb**

A small carousel is used at Fair time and sometimes for July 4th celebrations. It may have come from Sulphur, OK. The Parker issue of 'Carrousel Art' magazine, features a wooden, armored Parker, described as having come from a carousel in Fort Cobb.

Recent attempts to confirm the present-day status of the carousel were unsuccessful. (No photo)

### **Hinton**

This is a two-row, metal Parker carousel with sixteen jumpers and two chariots. It has updated fiber-glass trim with vintage, fluorescent lighting. It is a portable machine



**Hinton's modest carousel is a town favorite. Bob Varga took this picture in 1999.**

with a trailer-mounted center pole. It is used at the August County Fair, Rodeo Days and other special occasions.

### Hydro

Hydro has a wooden Allan Herschell carousel. It and other rides arrived with a traveling carnival around forty years ago, only to become mired in mud, a result of a local flood. Left by the carnival company, the townspeople rescued the rides and installed them in a local park. (No photo)

### Medicine Park

What looks to be a Parker carousel was at Medicine Park in an outdoor carnival setting. Medicine Park was a thriving, planned tourist resort, established in 1908. The healing powers of Medicine Creek, tennis courts, spas, swimming and fishing drew large crowds to the popular, picturesque enclave. (Photo below)

(Bob's original notes had listed "Lawton – No Information". I looked up the town of Lawton and saw that it was very close to the resort of Medicine Park, so I thought it was worth looking into as a possible location of a carousel. I already had a postcard of what looked like a carousel building at Medicine Park, (AKA, Lawton, on the card). I got in touch with Ed Stonerock, of Medicine Park, who generously inquired around to see if anyone remembered a carousel. Among the old-timers, nobody did. The traveling Parker seems to have been the only carousel ever at Medicine Park.

– Barbara Williams). (Photo below right)



**At Medicine Park, bushes obstruct the view of the carousel's animals, but judging by the center area, it looks like it may be a Parker. The carousel has the flaps, right, used to prevent freeloaders from jumping on the carousel while in motion. The postcard is undated. Credit: Barbara Williams**



**It is too bad that the life of the carousel was cut short by the failed Belle Isle project at Oklahoma City.**

Photo: Bob Guenther

### Mountain View

Once outfitted with wooden Parkers, Mountain View's carousel now has newer aluminum Parkers. It is a large carousel, with sixteen sections and measuring forty-five feet in diameter. Some of the old wooden Parkers are still around town, in possession of the locals. (No photo).

### Oklahoma City, Belle Isle Park

Belle Isle Park's Parker carousel was moved to Spring-lake Park in 1928. Amusements at Belle Isle included a small coaster, a dance pavilion and rowboats. A second kiddie-sized carousel at Belle Isle burned in the 1940's. By 1948, all of the attractions were gone. In 1984, the Dentzel carousel from President's Park, Carlsbad, New Mexico was bought by developers of Belle Isle Shopping Mall. It was to be installed at the site of the old Belle Isle Park power plant as the centerpiece of the new endeavor. The oil bust of the 1980's brought the project to an immediate and permanent end. Ultimately, the carousel's animals were sold off. Still unaccounted for, the frame was most likely left behind at Belle Isle and sold for scrap along with old machinery and



**The carousel-like building in Lawton is seen in the upper left with a pink and red roof. Credit: Barbara Williams**



**Delmar Garden, Oklahoma City, postmarked 1909**

Credit: Barbara Williams

piping when the old power plant was cleared out in the late 1980s. (Photo left)

### Oklahoma City, Black Hawk Amusement Park

Originally, this was the Black Hawk Lodge and Restaurant, established around 1933. By 1937, this enterprise had a swimming pool, antique shop, miniature golf, rides and a carousel; make unknown. (No photo)

### Oklahoma City, Delmar Garden

Delmar Garden opened in 1902 with an auditorium for vaudeville. Added was a roller coaster, Ferris wheel, race track, dance hall, live theater, swimming pool, beer garden, hotel, restaurant and a Kinedrome, an early motion picture house. The carousel was located at the back end of the promenade on the right. Delmar Garden was located in the lowlands, which flooded, and was plagued by mosquitoes. As a result, the park closed in 1910. The Oklahoma Historical Society Oral History Department taped an interview with a Mrs. Annie Drummond, (born 1890), who came to Oklahoma in 1898. One of her memories was of Delmar Garden. She said she went there many times. She talked about baseball games, picnics and the theater and the rides:

Annie: "Yes, there were rides."

Interviewer: "Was there a carousel?"

Annie: "A carousel? Well..ah..I don't recall."

Interviewer: "What was your favorite ride at Delmar?"

Annie: "Why the Merry-Go-Round, of course!"

(Photo above)

### Oklahoma City, Fairgrounds

Appearing in *The Daily Oklahoman*, Sept 30, 1910, was a description of the attractions in the forthcoming fair, "The big 'Chanticleer' Steeplechase is the first one to be used in this country and attracts both old and young. This machine was made in England and most of it is hand carved. It was imported at a cost of \$30,000 and has long since paid for itself." This ride came with the Patterson Shows which provided most of the midway attractions.

The fair also had as a permanent attraction, a 1909 Loeff carousel in a Loeff-built building. In 1954, the Loeff was ac-



**James W. Bostock's platform gallopers, bought by the James Patterson Shows, that furnished attractions for the Oklahoma City fair. This is an earlier, undated photograph of the ride. Credit: Barbara Williams**

quired by Carl Sedlmayr, owner of Royal American Shows, the world's largest railroad carnival. This coincided with the closure of the fair at its original site, demolition of the Loeff-built carousel building, and relocation that year to the fair's new site. At the new fairgrounds, Royal American Shows brought in one of their two PTC carousels. It is not known if the Loeff operated at the new fair site. Sedlmayr gave the Loeff carousel to the Ringling Museum in Sarasota, Florida, in 1965, with the intention of having it operate there as a money maker for the museum. It was ultimately dispersed, with most of the animals selling at auction in 1986.

(Photos above and below)

### Oklahoma City, Frontier City

Frontier City had a 1959 metal Chance carousel that was destroyed in the devastating 1998 tornadoes. Upon initial inspection, it appeared that damage to the carousel was limited to the upper rim, but further scrutiny confirmed that all



**One of the Oklahoma City Fair Loeffs on display at the Ringling Museum in the 1980's. Credit: Bob Guentner**



**The Chance carousel made especially for the Smithsonian's 150th birthday tribute/year-long traveling exhibit, seen here at Frontier City, Oklahoma City, in 1998. Credit: Bob Varga**

of the vertical parts had been harmed by the twisting winds. This machine was returned to Chance for salvage. It was replaced in 1998 with the Chance carousel commissioned by the Smithsonian for its 150th birthday tribute, "America's Smithsonian" - the world's largest, year-long traveling museum, of which the carousel was an important, interactive attraction. For Frontier City, Chance was commissioned to make an "Oklahoma Horse" for the carousel, decorated with American Indian motifs and the Oklahoma state flag. Frontier City opened in 1959 and is still in operation.

(Photo above)

### **Oklahoma City, Springlake Park**

Springlake Park opened in 1926, adding rides from defunct Belle Isle Park. The park was purposely located near the zoo so the trolley line could bring patrons to both sites. Springlake had a Parker carousel, Big and Little Dipper Philadelphia Toboggan Company coasters, a ballroom and a train. The park had two major fires, one in 1946 and another in 1981, but the carousel was spared both times. Springlake finally closed due to racial unrest in the park and it was leveled in 1983. The Parker carousel was sold in



**Springlake Park's sweet-faced horses are showing their age in the 1980's. Credit: Bob Guenther**



**Wedgewood's PTC 59, seen here at auction in Florida in 1985. Credit: John Daniel**

1982, and no longer exists. The Big Dipper was reduced to lumber, the train went to Lima, Peru. The site is now occupied by a technical school with a Springlake carousel horse and coaster car displayed on the campus.

(Photo below left)

### **Oklahoma City, Wedgewood Park**

Wedgewood Park opened in 1958. Maurice Woods, the park owner-operator, bought PTC 59 in 1961 at auction from Lincoln Park, Worcester, Mass for \$7,900. Woods had the carousel shipped to Oklahoma by a furniture mover. Over the winter, two hundred and fifty gallons of stripper were used to remove the many layers of paint. Woods' mother, Esther, repainted the forty eight horses and chariots in her living room.

Wedgewood was adjacent to housing and the noise from the amusement park, in particular the coaster and the carousel, became an issue. Controversy also arose when integration of the Olympic-sized swimming pool was mandated, but not implemented, resulting in the closure of Wedgewood in 1969. The carousel went to Petticoat Junction, Panama City, Florida., where it was sold at auction in 1985. Wedgewood Park is now the site of the Wedgewood Village Apartments. (Photo above)



**Bell's four-row Parker in Tulsa, as seen in the 1980s Credit: Bob Guenther**



*The endangered species carousel at the Oklahoma City Zoo in 1999. Credit: Bob Varga*

### **Oklahoma City, Oklahoma city Zoological park**

Originally named the Lincoln Zoo, it had a metal Herschell carousel, that operated through 1967. There was a train ride, steamboat and the Skyride that came from Spring-lake Park. The last surviving original ride, the Skyride, was demolished in 1998. The new Carousel Works Endangered Species carousel was installed in 1999.

(Photo above)

### **Sand Springs**

Sand Springs opened in 1911. It was a boating and picnicking resort, developed around a large orphanage for the people involved with the facility. Rides were added, a means by which to attract a trolley line to the park. The rides brought problems to the area, however, so Sand Springs' carousel, Philadelphia Toboggan Company #10, and all of the other rides were sold to Crystal City Amusement Park in Tulsa in 1934. (No photo)

### **Shawnee**

This was a privately owned Herschell-Spillman carousel with forty small horses. It was sold to a Cleveland, Ohio carnival company about twenty years ago. (No photo)

### **Tulsa, Bell's Amusement Park**

Jack Johnson brought his 1917, four-row Parker carousel with him when he moved from San Antonio, Texas to Tulsa in 1983 to manage Bell's Amusement Park (1951-2006). The carousel, bought by Johnson's father from a traveling carnival in 1940, had operated at Playland in San Antonio until the park's closure in 1980. The Parker and its band organ were auctioned off in the late 1980's. It was replaced with a 1954 metal, three-row, all jumper, thirty-six foot, Arrow machine with taped music. (Photo left)

### **Tulsa, Crystal City Amusement Park**

Crystal City Amusement Park, (1920's - 1956), was built adjacent to and intended as competition for nearby older Electric Park. It had a spring-fed swimming pool and the rides from Sand Springs, including PTC 10. Crystal City prospered until the late 1940's, when it began to fade. Most of the rides were sold off in 1948 and moved to Lakeview Park in Tulsa. The carousel burned at Crystal Lake in one of a series of mysterious fires that occurred in the 1950's,



*Nothing was found about an Illions carousel being at Lakeview Park, Tulsa, Oklahoma. Credit: Frederick Fried Archive*

leaving the dance hall and the swimming pool as the only remaining attractions. Crystal City Amusement Park was replaced with the Crystal City Shopping Center. (No photo)

### **Tulsa, Electric Park**

Electric Park was built before neighboring Crystal City was established. It had a dance hall, merry-go-round, rides, concessions, swings, a fun house and a miniature train. A man-made lagoon and one of the biggest swimming pools in the state were the park's main attractions. Crystal City overshadowed Electric park and it closed in 1928.

(No photo)

### **Tulsa, Lakeview Park**

Crystal Lake's rides were moved to Lakeview Park in 1948, minus the PTC carousel.

In a 1975 *Amusement Business* ad, an Illions carousel is for sale at Lakeview. (No photo, ad shown above)

### **Tulsa, Mohawk Park (Tulsa Zoo)**

This 'Merry Go Round Employee' badge was found with a metal detector by Wally Dick of Broken Arrow while he was treasure-hunting in and around an old house in North Tulsa. It was near the site of Mohawk Park. (Photo below)





**This postcard is postmarked July 16, 1908. Summer fun of the type described at Vinita.**

Credit: Barbara Williams

#### **Tulsa, Woodland Hills Mall**

This was a twelve year old (as of 1999), two-row, sixteen-horse, metal carousel made by the San Antonio Roller Company. It is no longer at the mall. (No photo)

#### **Vinita, Electric Park**

All that remains of Electric park is the reflecting pool which is now used for watering pastured livestock. (No photo)

#### **Vinita , I.T. (Indian Territory)**

In 1894, the Unassigned Lands of Oklahoma were purchased from the Cherokee. A celebration marked the occasion that included fifty lemonade and ice cream stands, thirty lunch counters, eight photo galleries, two shooting galleries, five merry-go-rounds, five dance floors and two gambling wheels, along with exhibits and shows.

Tent shows, fairs, rodeos, the Ringling Brothers Circus and the Walter Main Shows came to Vinita in the early 1900's. (Photo above)

The photo of Aunt Ola Belle on the carousel horse in a studio setting was taken somewhere in Vinita. Electric Park is a possibility as is the 1894 celebration or the traveling shows that came to town. (Photo right)

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*Magazine; The Chronicles of Oklahoma; The Merry-Go-Roundup; The Daily Oklahoman; The Sunday Oklahoman; Vinita I.T., 1821-1907; Pendelton Woods (OG&E, ret.); Price Woodridge, Oklahoma Educational Television Authority.*



**Written on the undated photograph is "Aunt Ola Belle". Stamped is "Vinita I.T." (Indian Territory) The horse looks like an early Loeff. Credit Barbara Williams**