



Cheyenne Mountain Zoological Society

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History of the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo Carousel

The carousel at Cheyenne Mountain Zoo has a rich history. Oral history holds that Spencer Penrose, founder of The Broadmoor hotel and the Zoo, first became aware of this carousel after seeing it at the 1932 World's Fair. Correspondence shows his determination to acquire the unit from the Allan Herschell Company in North Tonawanda, New York, and his enthusiasm at being able to bring it to the Zoo in 1937, shortly before the zoological park was officially established in 1938. The carousel is one of the few remaining structures of the "original" Zoo.

The carousel is historically significant for several other reasons. It represents a popular form of entertainment for an era dating from the late 19th century. Carousels were originally introduced as adult entertainment, being the fastest mechanical ride one could experience other than locomotive travel. Of the more than 6,000 carousels produced, the National Carousel Association lists fewer than 300 remaining in the United States. Colorado is unusual with five operating machines, the Zoo carousel being one of these; all are listed on the State Register of Historic Properties.

The Herschell portable half-and-half, double row unit acquired by Penrose also represents an historic engineering change in carousel production. After World War I, competition imposed financial challenges on this industry. Consequently, when the Zoo's unit was produced, circa 1925, it was one of about 100 units produced in the "half-and-half" style; that is, half of the horse (the body and head) was carved while the legs were cast aluminum, allowing economies of scale. Further, the carousel was designed as a "county fair" unit that could be disassembled and assembled by two men in just eight hours, allowing a single carousel to move frequently, reaching a wider audience. This became the dominant form of production for the next 40 years.



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Although the Herschell Museum believes as many as a dozen of this style may exist, the National Carousel Association identifies only three remaining, the Zoo's being one of these three. The Zoo's unit is also unique in that the paint on the center panels of the rounding board is original factory paint, which is rare.

Antique Ride Gets a New Lease on Life

The Herschell carousel at Cheyenne Mountain Zoo continued to entertain guests over the decades. However, more than 60 years of loving had taken its toll on the horses. The wooden flanks and bellies of those in the worst condition bore scars from the tapping of thousands of tiny, shoe-clad feet. Small hands had patted and rubbed once-colorful paint down to bare wood in places. Ears, noses and tails were chipped and broken. The Zoo had wrestled for years with how to restore one of its star attractions. With competing financial priorities, there were no easy answers.

A State Register of Historic Properties designation in 1997 by the Colorado Historical Society qualified the carousel for a \$93,411 State Historical Fund preservation grant, which provided the impetus for a fundraising campaign. More than \$277,000 was raised—including a \$25,000 grant from the El Pomar Foundation—which covered not only total refurbishment of the carousel but also construction of a pavilion to house it in a new central location within the Zoo.

The task of restoring the 20-horse and two-chariot carousel to its former grandeur fell to Lakewood artist and sculptor Will Morton. In all, Morton spent about nine months making repairs while trying to retain the carousel's authenticity.

The first months were the most laborious. Morton drew detailed diagrams of each horse. Then, with the patience and care of an archaeologist uncovering some fragile bit of ancient mosaic, he painstakingly removed layers of varnish and paint until he uncovered the original coat. He matched as closely as possible



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in both color and reconstruction the intricate curlicues and flowers that decorated the saddles.

The horses were made of Eastern yellow poplar. Heads, bodies and tails were roughed out by machine and finished by skilled woodcarvers, artists who couldn't help but leave some personal mark on their work. Morton, too, left his artistic mark by carving near-perfect matches to replace broken bits of ears and noses.

After repair, the bodies were painted with primer, sanded and prepared for painting. It was only when Morton began painting the horses did their individual personalities come to life again.

Morton also restored the paintings on the carousel structure, rewired the lights and reworked all the mechanical parts. The band organ, which provides the lilting tunes, was the only part restored elsewhere.

The restored carousel reopened to the public on May 20, 1999.

Carousel Nuts and Bolts

- The Cheyenne Mountain Zoo carousel was manufactured by the Allan Herschell Co. of North Tonawanda, N.Y., about 1926. It is an Ideal Two Abreast, smaller, county-fair style carousel made to be disassembled easily by two workers in eight hours and moved, despite weighting seven tons. Assembled, the carousel is 36 feet in diameter with 20 "jumping" horses, arranged in two rows, and two stationary chariots.
- According to Herschell factory records, the carousel was believed to have been used at the 1932 World's Fair in Seattle. In 1937, Spencer Penrose, builder of The Broadmoor Hotel and Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, wrote the company asking to buy a "Little Beauty" Two Abreast Carousel advertised for \$4,600. He was instead offered the refurbished Ideal Two Abreast for the bargain price of \$3,750.



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- From 1895 to 1925, an estimated 6,000 carousels with wooden horses operated in the United States; less than 300 of those exist today, 165 of which are operational. The Zoo's carousel is one of five historic carousels left in Colorado; the others are in Pueblo City Park, Elitch Gardens in Denver, Kit Carson County Fairgrounds in Burlington and Lakeside in Denver. All are on the State Register of Historic Properties.
- The Zoo's Herschell is one of only 100 of its kind manufactured and three of its kind left in the United States.