

Travel and Adventure: Horsin' around in Chattanooga

by Ruth A. Hill

Ever had a yen to decorate your house with a carousel horse? Or maybe you'd like to give feet to that childhood nostalgia you feel when you encounter a working carousel. Perhaps there's just the desire to try something new, in hopes you might arouse an unknown and creative outlet.

CAROUSEL - Chattanooga's Coolidge Carousel recalls the 1920s golden age of carousel. CNS Photo courtesy of Chattanooga Area CVB. CIGAR STORE TURK - At the Horsin' Around workshop, other figures are created by students of wood carving besides carousel animals, such as this cigar store Turk. CNS Photo courtesy of Tom Keen. TRADITIONAL CARVING - Tom Keen carved this cigar store Indian at the Horsin' Around workshop, a celebration of traditional wood carving near Chattanooga, Tenn. CNS Photo courtesy of Tom Keen. These and other motivations send carvers and wannabes to Horsin' Around, a carousel carving school near Chattanooga, Tenn., which champions traditional carving methods. There, students cut and whittle into reality whatever carving fantasy is theirs. Not all do horses. Look around the workshop, and you might see a gorilla, a frog, a ship's head, or a panda. Most students aren't experts. In fact, many have never carved anything. Many include a go at carving in their travel plans to nearby American tourism icons like Rock City and Lookout Mountain.

Horsin' Around owner and founder Bud Ellis said the men and women who sign up for his instruction come from many locales and occupations.

"We've had a rocket scientist, and another man from New Mexico who helped ground a lens for the Hubble Space Telescope. FBI and CIA agents, doctors, truck drivers, and church ministers have come to us," says Ellis.

With Ellis' personalized help, students select a picture of what they want to carve. To make a blueprint, that picture gets copied on acetate by projecting the image on a wall. With the acetate patterns, paper patterns get made for each section of the body. "Then we round out a shape with a chain saw, then students learn how to carve with chisels - almost a lost art - and mallets," he continues. "Between all the electric and hand work, students spend on average between three to 400 hours on their projects. They might work here in our workshop for a week, then take separate body parts home with them in a big suitcase. Or, sometimes we ship body parts home for them." Once the carving is done, Ellis helps students sand and paint their objects.

Tom Keen is a retiree who took up carving in Ellis' workshop to fill time after he left his career as a chemical plant manufacturing manager.

"I'm not artistic," says Keen, "but I've always enjoyed primitive art like cigar store Indians and ship's heads. They are hard to find and afford, so I've ended up carving several for gifts to family and friends. It gratifies my creative drive and gift giving needs - and it's relaxing. Maybe 50 years from now one of my grandchildren might look upon one as my legacy."

Keen says another payoff for him in carving at Ellis' shop are the people it attracts.

"You can learn to carve here, and you can meet some really nice people, many of whom come here from quite a distance. They enjoy seeing what we have around Chattanooga, and they come to learn carving. This workshop is a unique place because with Bud, people get a year's worth of instruction, and they learn a lost art of carving - the way it was done 100 years ago."

Ellis said he got his love of carving from his mother. He recalls her many late night hours at work on kitchen table projects while she waited for his dad to come home from his job with the railroad. Then there was art school at Indiana University, graduate work, and a professorship at the University of Tennessee, where he taught silversmithing, pottery, and mountain crafts done the traditional way. At one time, he also taught emotionally disturbed kids in a Chattanooga high school.

Horsin' Around school emerged as Ellis began acting on his idea to create a traditional carousel for Chattanooga. He and his wife began attending carousel conventions and visiting parks with merry-go-rounds. Ellis took workshops and learned to restore old carousel animals. He found a derelict 1895 Dentzel languishing in an Atlanta warehouse, and with funding help from the mayor, brought it home. All 52 animals had to be replaced. He began carving on the project after work, nights and weekends.

Gradually, others caught his carousel dream, and volunteered to carve. They worked in a rented space on the incline up to Lookout Mountain. When he put horses in the window on the road, travelers stopped to see what they were all about.

"People would drive by the where I was carving, see me, and knock on the door," recalled Ellis. "They wanted to know if I had any carousel animals for sale, and some wanted to learn to carve themselves."

The rest, as they say, is history. Ellis got so many students he had to move into a warehouse across the street.

Meanwhile, Ellis persevered in getting the city to build a pavilion that would shelter the carousel. After a dozen years of carving and promoting the idea, the carousel stands in Coolidge Park, above the Tennessee River. Riders hear tunes from two band organs - a Wurlitzer and a hand carved Stinson. The Coolidge carousel is one of only about 150 operating in the U.S., the remnants from the over 4,000 that were still around in 1958.

Back at Horsin' Around workshop, some carvers work on personal projects, while others create animals that will populate another carousel - for Chattanooga's zoo. Ellis expects 33 animals to be done by next year, and he promises some unusual pieces - like a mountain goat, dolphin, leopard, baby zebra, and baby elephant.

To a question about his passion for carving, Ellis answers with a word picture of a carousel in motion.

"One of the best things is watching mothers with little bitty babies, eyes big as saucers, getting on beside old ladies in their nineties," he said. "One is taking the first ride, the other may be taking the last ... life parades before you and you see it clearer on a carousel."

IF YOU GO

Horsin' Around: One year of personal carving instruction and assistance from Bud Ellis ranges from \$1,250 to \$1,650, depending on project size. Students may come and go to the workshop during their year, and ship body parts home to work off-site. Watch carvers at work during workshop tours for \$3 per person. (423-332-1111; www.horsin-around.net)

Carousel Magic: A Mansfield, Ohio, family-owned company specializes in producing custom-designed, hand-carved carousels sized for backyards to amusement parks, and in restoring others. The company's new and restored carousels may be found from New York to Idaho. A carving kit, five days of carving instruction, and bench space costs \$495. Classes may be arranged to fit personal schedules, with at least six weeks advance notice. (419-526-4009; www.carouselmagic.com)

National Carousel Association: With its mission to promote conservation, appreciation, knowledge, and enjoyment of classic wooden carousels, the association offers information about where to find your best rides on a merry-go-round. (www.nca-usa.org)

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