News

Round and round on memory lane

BY MATT ROCHELEAU FOR THE SUN CHRONICLE Tuesday, July 29, 2008 3:09 AM EDT

Bob Curran shows Elena Clarke of Attleboro and Mark Clarke of Attleboro his model of the Looff Carousel. The carousel still operates at Slater Park in Pawtucket. Curran brought his model of the 1895 carousel to the Larson Senior Center last week for the seniors to enjoy. (Staff photo by Tom Maguire)

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Think of a day at an amusement park, and maybe hot dogs, carnival prizes, cotton candy and a lurching stomach after a few dizzying rides comes to mind.

But for Bob Curran of South Attleboro, nothing compares with a few spins around a classic carousel.

Now retired, the 74-year-old Curran built from scratch a fully functional, one-12th scale replica of the Looff Carousel, where he worked at Slater Memorial Park in Pawtucket.

Completed about five years ago, the model has 50 hand-carved, basswood pieces, including 42 horses, three dogs, one camel, a giraffe, a lion and two double benches.

Each horse is made of 12 to 14 parts, Curran said. Music plays through a mini band organ as a sewing machine belt takes the carousel from a complete stop to up to 10 revolutions per minute. The mini ride runs for about three minutes before pausing for another three to simulate riders getting on and off.

Bob Curran sets up his model of the 1895 Looff Carousel. (Staff photo by Tom Maguire)

The 24-inch high, 44-inch diameter carousel, centered above a 48-inch square base, took about four years to build.

In the center of the ride, standing near the controls is the carousel operator.

"That was me. But I never wore those coveralls," Curran said last week at Attleboro's Rev. Larson Senior Center, where he displayed the miniature ride for the first time in about five years.

He worked on the full-size ride as a carousel operator at Slater Park for about four years.

Slater Park's Looff Carousel was built in 1895 and is among the oldest and few remaining wooden stander carousels still operating in the United States. A "stander" carousel is one in which the horses or other animals remain in place, rather than go up and down.

The carousel is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and is named after its

builder Charles I.D. Looff, who constructed the first carousel ever at Coney Island, N.Y.

Even on a carousel where riders and the horses they straddle do not go up and down, Curran said the hardest part of the job was making sure people stayed in their seats.

So, what attracted him to the giddy, yet sedate world of carousels?

"It wasn't for the money, that's for sure," Curran said. In fact, Curran said he put more of his own money into the ride than he made.

Bob Curran's model of the 1895 Looff Carousel is remarkable for its detail. The model is a one-12th scale replica of the Victorian-era landmark. (Staff photo by Tom Maguire)

He said he sanded down and replaced numerous boards to restore the art underneath. He fixed two fans, meant to cool the ride, so they would pass safety inspections. And, he sold carved miniature horses and donated the money to the carousel.

"I put a lot of my own money into it. I hope they appreciated it," said Curran, who stopped working at the park about five years ago.

Pawtucket, did in fact, show its appreciation in 1999 by refurbishing horse 4A on the carousel, and naming it "Bob" - after Curran.

His replica of the Looff Carousel also was on display in Pawtucket City Hall for a time.

He also has taken his replica on the road to miniature carousel shows in Pennsylvania.

"I think the workmanship is what gets them most," Curran said of other model builders who have admired his craft.

Curran concedes, however, that he needed help along the way.

Curran originally used ceramic for the model, since he didn't know how to carve wood. But he met online fellow carousel enthusiast Debbie Martinez of Houston, who, for a Christmas gift, sent a hand-carved miniature horse.

Previously unaware she was so adept at wood caring, Curran asked her to make the horses for his carousel. She accepted, carving and mailing two or three pieces at a time, based on Curran's measurements.

"I was lucky to find her," said Curran, who painted each piece as it arrived.

He estimated each horse Martinez made could sell for almost $100. Curran said he could not let her generosity go unrewarded, so he sent her $20 for each horse.

Another person he credits is his wife for putting up with him.

"She was a good inspiration," he said.

Now, the former truck driver, father of six, and grandfather of 14 says he is done building models. He plans to give the attention he once paid to the carousel toward caring for his wife.

Curran says he has considered donating the miniature carousel to a museum, and hopes to see a real, full-size carousel built in Attleboro.

He suggested Capron Park as a good spot, an idea that resonated with those gathered at the senior center.

"That's a good place for it" said David Downs of Attleboro, who was admiring the model. "I think it's great. It takes a lot of work to make something like this."

Others agreed.

"I love it. It's my favorite ride," said Judith Shevory of Attleboro.

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