



# The Magic of CAROUSELS

SHE HAS RIDDEN CAROUSELS IN FRANCE AND KNOWS THE BEST ONES IN CALIFORNIA, BUT NANCY PHILLIPS DOESN'T HAVE TO TRAVEL FAR TO RIDE ONE OF THE MOST MAGICAL MERRY-GO-ROUNDS IN CANADA. IT'S LOCATED IN HER GARDEN.

Lodged in a sunny peach and white pavilion, 20 horses, pigs, roosters and rabbits have delighted Phillips' family and friends since 1970. "Just because you grow up doesn't mean you have to stop riding the merry-go-round," says Phillips, a Toronto artist and writer. "I don't think frivolity is taken seriously enough."

Phillips first became interested in carousels when she was in her early 20s and working for a New York advertising agency. She used to ride the Central Park carousel on her lunch hours and dreamed of owning one herself. Eighteen years ago, she spotted an intriguing ad in the newspaper and drove to Lake Simcoe where a junkyard dealer was waiting. "I saw these wooden animals piled in an old truck. They were in deplorable shape — their ears and legs were broken and missing; their paint was peeling and they were attached to this slimy, grease-covered pole," she recalls. "Yet even though they looked so awful, I saw the potential in them. I knew I could paint these animals and make them look lovely again."

Her trip to the junkyard made her the proud parent of 32 horses, rabbits, cats

Michael Foster/Carol Marino

The garden carousel is a "Flying Jenny" — the animals circle above a stationary floor. The carousel is housed in a permanent twelve-sided gazebo with views in all directions.

**By Kim Carter**



Michael Foster/Carol Marano

A cocky rooster of the Herschell-Spillman Company is a prized member of the Phillips' menagerie.

Discovered in a shoe shop where it was used to amuse children, the fanciful "hippokampus" is fashioned after a mythological Greek sea creature.



Michael Foster/Carol Marano

and pigs. But when husband, Derek, saw the odd menagerie delivered in three trucks, he told her she was on her own.

The job required artistry with paintbrush and chisel, and some research work in the library. Over a six-month period, she stripped, painted and restored the animals in her garage.

The restoration process called for a huge tank filled with stripping liquid. Armed with coveralls, plastic clothing and a face mask to protect her from the lethal fumes, Phillips dunked each 70 kilogram animal in and out of the tank — all by herself. "I could never do it

again," she shudders. A few of the very badly damaged animals were sent out for professional help.

Stripping showed that some of the animals had been painted more than 22 times. "Park attendants used to just slop coats of paint on them without much thought or care," sighs Phillips. She sanded the animals and gave them five coats of fresh paint, in candy-coloured green, peach, pink and turquoise.

Some of the Phillips' animals are quite delightful — "the flirting cat" was carved at the turn of the century by Salvatore Cernigliaro of the Dentzel company, while a friendly-looking pig and rooster are legacies of the Herschell-Spillman Company.

At one time, Nancy had 65 animals in her house, but she has cut back to 27. In addition to the backyard carou-

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sel, she has an ostrich, hippokampus (a creature from Greek mythology) and two glossy horses that were restored by Ruby Newman.

When she finished restoring her collection, Nancy was going to place the animals around the house, but then she decided she wanted a real carousel in her garden. Impressed by his wife's hard work, Derek, an engineer, and their two sons Mark and Thomas, designed the machinery for the carousel.

The carousel is a 'Flying Jenny' based on the carousels of the 17th century. The animals hang freely by poles attached only to the overhead structure and circle a stationary floor as opposed to more familiar designs that have a moving floor and animals that go up and down on a crank mechanism. Nancy and Toronto architect Gary Roxborough came up with the idea of a peach and white pavilion to protect the carousel in winter. Complete with French doors, Baroque mirrors, fan mouldings, gilt and skylight, the effect is romantic and breathtaking.

The carousel is powered by a one-horse motor concealed in the floor and original band organ music is supplied by audiotapes. The pavilion is heated, which means the carousel provides

## From the horse's mouth

To refine their horsemanship, young noblemen of 17th century France would sit on wooden horses mounted on beams extending from a central pole. Servants pushed the riders around and around while they tried to spear hanging rings.

This was a practice device for "carosello" (little war) an elaborate equestrian pageant in which participants had to pierce rings with their swords while riding at full speed. Later, the French added fancy carvings to these wooden horses; the English added steam and the modern carousel was born.

The popularity of this ride spread throughout Europe. Pigs, tigers, bears and ships with sails joined the traditional horses.

However, it was in the United States that carving these animals became a true art form. In the 1870s, carvers joined machinists in the drive to create more elaborate carousels. Animals became quite lifelike: horses neighed and galloped madly, pigs squealed and tigers roared.

By the turn of the century, several premier carvers emerged including Dentzel, Loeff, Parker and Herschell-Spillman. Dentzel's horses looked incredibly life-like and were elegant in stance and head position. For his menagerie animals, he gathered ideas from travelling circuses and natural history museum displays of African animals. Horses from the Loeff company were flamboyant, betassled creatures with real horsehair tails and bejewelled saddle blankets. Herschell-Spillman favoured simpler carvings, but his animals are especially

popular with collectors for their dreamy, gentle expressions. By contrast, Parker produced wild-eyed, snorting horses with flowing manes and legs at full extension.

The outside ring of the merry-go-round usually consisted of chariots (perfect for small children and Victorian mothers in long skirts) as well as lions, tigers and other large menagerie animals called "standers" (animals that don't move up and down). Inside rows had "jumpers", animals that moved up and down by a crank mechanism.

Several long planks called "sweeps" reached out from the central pole to carry the weight of horses and riders. To hide the overhead workings from view, the spaces between the ends of the sweeps were closed off with bevelled mirrors and wooden planks with hand-painted scenes from history or legend.

Motors drove the band organ: perforated cylinders released currents of pressurized air, activating brass, reed and percussion instruments.

At the height of their popularity, over 6,000 carousels operated in North America. Street car companies installed them at beaches and parks at the end of their lines to encourage passengers to use streetcars to get out of the city. By the Depression, however, the big carousels closed down.

Today, 200 carousels still operate in North America. The National Carousel Organization in New York City is working to preserve them and keep entire working carousels together.

much entertainment in the winter months. "It also bristles with burglar alarms," says Phillips who has had a run-in with "would-be horse thieves" in the past.

The Phillips' enjoy entertaining, and at her gala summer evening parties, Nancy can be found leading her guests (armed with tambourines, drums and banners) to the carousel. There she rings an old brass ship's bell and invites her guests to mount the steed of their choice. Over the years, the guest list has included distinguished Canadian like Pierre Berton, David Crombie and cartoonist Ben Wicks in addition to a host of enchanted toddlers and energetic grandparents.

"It really brings back happy memories of childhood," says Phillips and indeed, written in elegant script on the

carousel is an invitation from Nancy that cannot be resisted. "Cherish this carousel. It is my gift to the child in all of us."

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Interested in riding an old-fashioned carousel? Visit Calgary's Heritage Park Historical Village.

The park's carousel, built by the Herschell-Spillman Company in 1904, consists of 36 horses and four chariots, and is capable of carrying 60 passengers. It carried thousands of riders at the resort town of Winnipeg Beach in the early part of the 20th century. Later, it was acquired by Calgary's Bowness Park, an amusement park developed by the Calgary Municipal Railway. In the late 1960s, after much restoration work, it was moved to Calgary's Heritage Park, where it has been delighting riders of all ages ever since.



"Hold on to dreams,  
for if dreams die,  
life is a broken-winged horse  
that cannot fly"



Whether it's a prancing horse or a magical unicorn, all animals from the Nitty Gritty Carousel Workshop are hand carved. See story on page 18.



Steven Evans