Playin’ Around: Get to Know San Diego’s Historic Carousel

What goes around comes around, they say, and that’s especially true on a carousel! Did you know that Balboa Park is home to one of the most historic carousels in the nation? In honor of National Carousel Day (July 25), let’s get to know San Diego’s historic gem and have some fun commemorating the event at home.

Between 1900 and 1925 more than 4,000 carousels were created in the United States, fewer than 200 of which exist today. The Balboa Park Carousel was built in 1910 and took a circuitous route to its current location. Originally erected in Los Angeles, the carousel was moved to Coronado in 1913 as part of the town’s Tent City. In 1922 it was moved to Balboa Park, at the location now occupied by Fleet Science Center. It finally found its home adjacent to the San Diego Zoo in 1948.

Bill Brown, manager and operator of the carousel, has worked for the attraction nearly as long. “I enjoyed riding the Balboa Park Carousel as a child and noticed how much fun the people who worked there were having,” he says. After being told he had to wait until he was 16 to be hired, he bided his time until 1972 when he started operating the brass ring game. “I eventually worked my way up and have been operating and taking care of the carousel ever since.”

The brass ring was ubiquitous at all carousels in their heyday. Hanging just out of reach from the rotating platform, a rider lucky enough to stretch out and grab the brass ring won a prize—usually another go-round on the carousel. Balboa Park’s carousel is one of only 12 in the U.S. that still has an operating brass ring game.

The ride is also famous for being a menagerie carousel, meaning filled with a variety of animals to sit astride (not just horses). Most well-known are the frogs, decked out in tuxedos. Some believe the 1908 classic The Wind in the Willows was the inspiration for their attire, as Mr. Toad was always astoundingly replete. Almost all of the carousel animals are original, as are the beautiful paintings on the center panels and the outer rounding boards, the band organ, and the brass ring.

Another fun fact about the carousel is its speed. Clocking in at 13 mph, it’s one of the fastest ever made. Brown recalls a recent visit by a carousel expert who bragged his hometown carousel was the fastest anywhere. He sat in the rocking chair, which kids love, but is often too wild for adults. “After the ride was up to full speed, I asked him whose is faster,” Brown says. “As he was rocking back and forth, he yelled: ‘I take it back! Yours is faster!’”

Elisabeth Handley is a freelance writer, San Diego native and devotee of carousels—though never a brass ring winner!

Learn more about Balboa Park’s historic carousel, including when it’s expected to open, at www.friendsofbalboapark.org/balboa-park-carousel.

Balboa Park’s annual event may be canceled this year, but it doesn’t mean we can’t celebrate at home. Commemorate National Carousel Day by making our unique carousel craft and carousel cupcakes. Step-by-step instructions (and more photos) are at www.sandiegofamily.com.