

MISSOULA, MONTANA

A Carousel for Missoula

A Missoula website says it is called “The Garden City, for its mild winters—relative to the rest of Montana—and is generally regarded by its residents as a pretty good place to live. We hike, ski, fish, run rivers and ride mountain bikes. We talk politics and shoot pool...Missoula is not a bad place to hang out.”

It got better in 1991, when a local cabinet-maker named Chuck Kaparich, accompanied by a large hand-carved wooden horse, moseyed into Mayor Dan Kemmis’ office and offered to build a carousel and donate it to the city if the civic government would provide the land. Dan Kemmis, sometimes referred to as “Mayor Moonbeam,” agreed. Kaparich first set up a woodcarving class at the Missoula Vocational-Technical School to begin his carousel-making project. Word was out, and when registration was announced, Chuck’s class filled to its forty-person capacity in fifteen minutes. People seemed drawn both to the idea of a community-built merry-go-round and to Kaparich’s insistence that “we’re gonna do it right—high quality and first-class.” Volunteer carvers had to master making frames for mirrors and gargoyles before they could work on horses. They had to use the old traditional ways. After a while, the project moved to Kaparich’s garage, and in good weather, his driveway as well. And four nights a week for three years, ten to twenty people at a time would be over at Chuck’s carving, painting, talking, and, sometimes, listening as one of them read aloud to the rest. One hundred thousand volunteer hours eventually went into the project, and the completed carousel has been open to the public every day since its first ride on Labor Day, 1995. Forty-one wooden horses, and two chariots to accommodate the disabled, are mounted on an historic Herschell-Spillman frame, and move around inside a building that can be fully opened in good weather and closed up in bad.

Chuck Kaparich made four of the ponies. Four more were named and designed by the four elementary school classes that donated the most of the 1,000,000 pennies dropped into milk jugs all over west-central Montana. The additional thirty-three horses and the two chariots were named, designed, and built by adopting individuals, families, and groups for \$2,500 each.

“We always say ‘we’ when we talk about the carousel,” says Theresa Cox, an early volunteer and now the Executive Director of A Carousel For Missoula, “because almost everybody was somehow a part of it. Blue collar people, university professors, unemployed people, retired people in their seventies and eighties, kids as young as eight, doctors, lawyers, and ‘granolas’ (our left-over hippies). And people don’t only claim a connection to the carousel, they claim ownership, and pride. The carvers still get together once a week, making animals for other carousels and for fund-raising use by non-profits; the mechanical guys still come in once a week to make sure everything is functioning. And now we are all working on a new, large, play area in Caras Park right next to the carousel. We have a plan in place for literally a thousand people to come in over six days to start and finish the playground. Yes, I would say the carousel has made a difference to Missoula.”

Says Chuck Kaparich: “You could go into a town forty miles down the Clark Fork, and they might think a carousel was the dumbest thing for a community to be involved in. But, for Missoula, it makes the people here say, ‘Hell, if we could build a carousel from just about scratch, think of all the other wonderful things that can happen.’”

Contact: www.carousel.com

406-549-8382