

# Crank up the music

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On the south shore of Lake Ontario sits the hamlet of Olcott, where carousel organ collectors from around the country will gather this weekend to share "the happiest music on Earth."

More than 100 members of the Carousel Organ Association of America will haul their instruments from 14 states and Canada. Calliopes, grind organs, Wurlitzer and Stinson band organs -- some of which are the size of a room -- will fill the air with carnival music from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. today and Sunday.

For most, it's a trip back in time.

"When I was 3 and at Olcott, I went to the merry-go-round and I just loved the music I heard," said rally organizer Dan Wilke of South Buffalo. "That was fascinating because the carousel organs [located in the pit of a carousel] are not electric at all. They're operated by air, so it's not only the music they play, but how they make the music."

Wilke, 47, and his wife Anne, 48, were married 23 years ago, and are also roller coaster enthusiasts. They find the joy of collecting grind organs is sharing their music with others.

"Let me play this for you," Wilke said one recent evening as he and his wife sat in their living room. "It's a sweetheart. I absolutely love the sound. Would you care for some white birch beer?"

Wilke inserted a music roll -- the one that will play "Memories" from "Cats" -- and took his post behind the German grind organ, purchased as a kit from an importer in Erie, Pa. Cranking, he explained, requires an even and constant speed of your arm. The person who cranks is called the organ grinder. Wilke can crank without pause for three hours.

Grind organs were once called monkey organs because the grinders had live monkeys who attracted an audience and then worked the crowd by carrying a cup to collect coins, according to Ted Guillaum, association president. They were a staple of street performers from about 1880 to 1920, here and in Europe.

"I wish I had a nickel for everyone who asked me where my monkey was," said Guillaum, who purchased his German-crafted Raffin crank organ in 2003. Guillaum expects the Olcott rally to draw a record number of instruments.

"I had worked on the Delta Queen and Mississippi Queen steamboats and loved the sound of the calliope," said Guillaum, 62, and an archival assistant with the Tennessee Library and Archive in Nashville. "I jumped in not knowing anything."

The Carousel Organ Association sponsors a handful of rallies each year in such cities as Urbandale, Iowa; Weston, Mont., and Chattanooga, Tenn. A favorite rally point is Knoebels Amusement Park in Elysburg, Pa.

At the Olcott rally, the crank grinders will line Main Street's shaded sidewalks. The larger band organs will be in Krull Park. The organ rally coincides with Old Olcott Days, which takes place in Olcott Beach Carousel Park, home to a 1928 style Herschell-Spillman two-row carousel and a 1931 Wurlitzer band organ.

Look closely at each display, and you will find that some of the collectors have named their instruments -- like sailors who name their boats. Retired El Paso Fire Chief Larry Kern calls his traveling band organ the Ambassador. There's also Trudy, Katie Sue, King William and a fine Dutch organ named Das Eichhornchen, or The Squirrel.

"Most of the guys name [the instruments] after their favorite female or something," said Noel Blair of Grand Island, who will bring his unnamed 1924 Wurlitzer 146A band organ.

Blair, a veteran boat builder and national runabout racing champion, said it took two years of stripping brightly colored paint to find his Wurlitzer's true mission oak. Its 106 pipes are also crafted from wood.

"I'm the kind of guy who can fabricate anything," said the burly collector, "and this is the type of hobby where you must have mechanical ability."

Note by note -- this organ has 46 -- Blair fine-tuned his fussy Wurlitzer, a pair of tweezers at the ready just in case a shard of music roll paper strayed into a pipe. Blair, 77, is a retired U.S. Merchant Marine officer who likes to be called Captain. His grandfather was chief electrician at the Allan Herschell Company in North Tonawanda, maker of roller coasters and carousels at the turn of the century.

"I guess I have it in my blood or genes or something," said Blair, who with his wife, Myrna, owns several classic cars, four Wurlitzer jukeboxes and a Nelson-Wiggins Orchestrion, a honky-tonk stand-up piano with xylophone, snare drum and triangle. Its music, Blair said, will make you dance.

Like the smaller street organs, calliopes and player pianos, carousel band organs play music off rolls of perforated paper that are coded with songs of all types including

patriotic, spiritual, show tunes and contemporary. Blair just bought a new Beatles music roll that he plans to bring to the rally.

The Stinson band organ that Edwin Evarts bought for himself as a retirement gift is rarely played at home, but when it is -- like on July 4th when he and wife Bernice treated their street to patriotic music -- the neighbors came over to thank them.

"They said it really got them in the spirit," said Bernice. "We play 20 minutes at the most."

The Evarts live in North Tonawanda, a center of musical instrument manufacturing in the early 1900s. Last year, the Wurlitzer Building hosted band organ collectors for the first rally ever held on the grounds where the instruments were once built.

"The Stinson we bought is made from oak, but instead of having to tune it all the time, we have it electronically controlled," explained Bernice, who said the instrument was hand-built by a 78-year-old man in Ohio. "Ours is high tech. We just put the tunes we want to play on a computer. We have over 2,000 tunes it will play continuously."

Bernice worked as a model maker at General Motors. Edwin was a tinsmith at Chevy when they met and discovered carousels and band organs.

"I was always a carousel person," said Bernice, "so I decided to build one. After I built a miniature carousel -- it's 4-foot diameter -- with horses that are only 6 and 7 inches tall, Eddy got fascinated with band organs."

Bernice compared the Olcott rally to a class reunion.

"We're not very wealthy, but yet some of the people there are millionaires. It's just a nice atmosphere," said Bernice. "We don't have any contests or prizes. We just do everything for fun."